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Keishi Ayasato

Illustration by
Saki Ukai

Torture Princess

◆ Fremd Torturchen ◆

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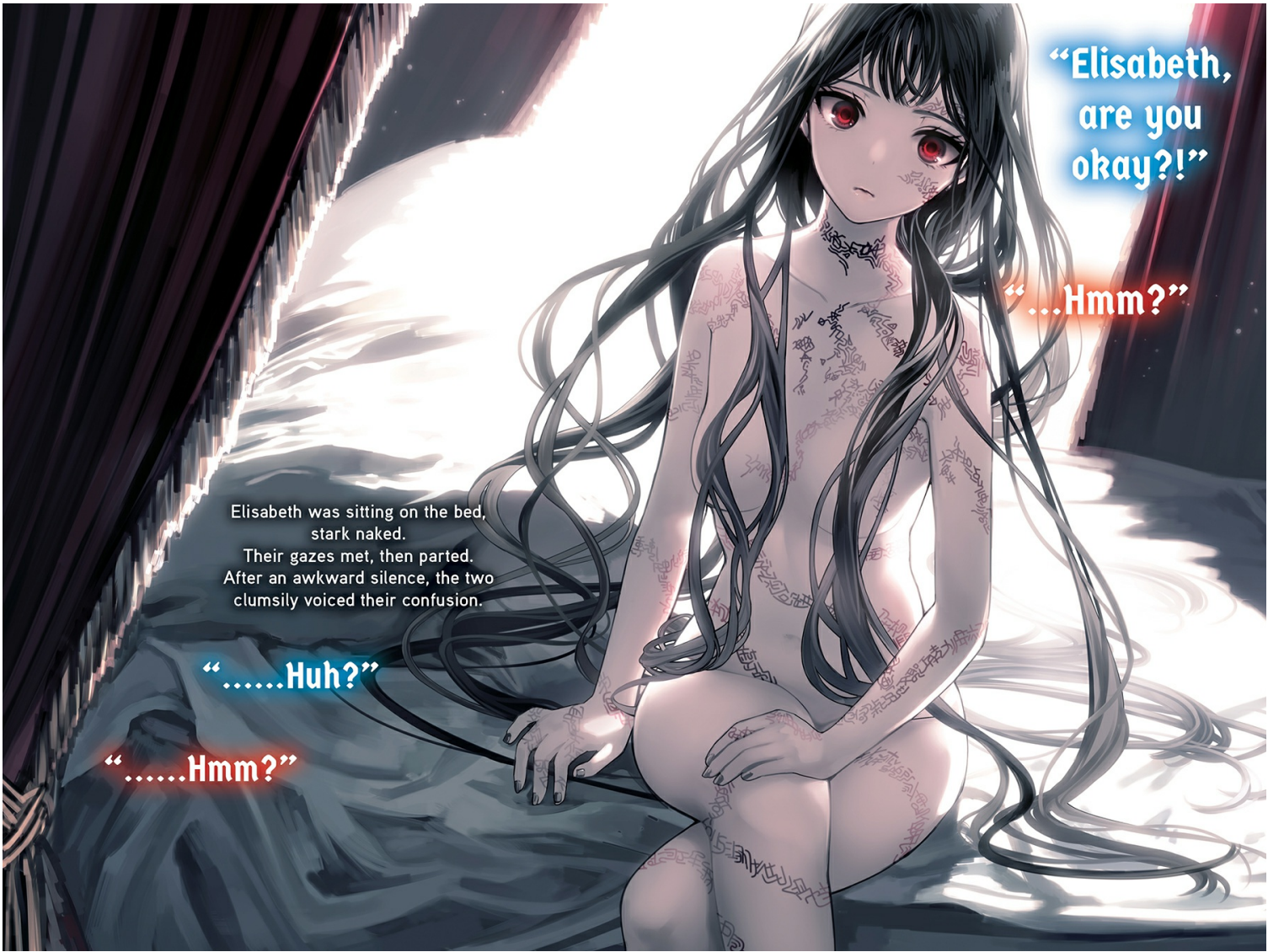


Torture Princess

Fremd Torturchen

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“Elisabeth,
are you
okay?!”

“...Hmm?”

Elisabeth was sitting on the bed,
stark naked.
Their gazes met, then parted.
After an awkward silence, the two
clumsily voiced their confusion.

“.....Huh?”

“.....Hmm?”



◆◆◆◆ Hina's Diary

Clear weather, nice and warm,
no battles against demons.

Today, I cleaned the windows with Master Kaito.

He seemed to have difficulty climbing the ladder to reach the clerestory windows, but being able to work together with him so much made me very, very happy.

Lady Elisabeth spent the day idling about like a true noble, but as she was tidying up some of her personal belongings, she found a deck of cards, so all three of us played together when night fell.

Lady Elisabeth emerged the victor.

(She cheated. Her technique was such that it fooled even my eyes...
That's Lady Elisabeth for you!)

Master Kaito came in last place. It was a crushing defeat (how adorable!).

The two of them remain in good spirits, and today was another wonderfully peaceful day!

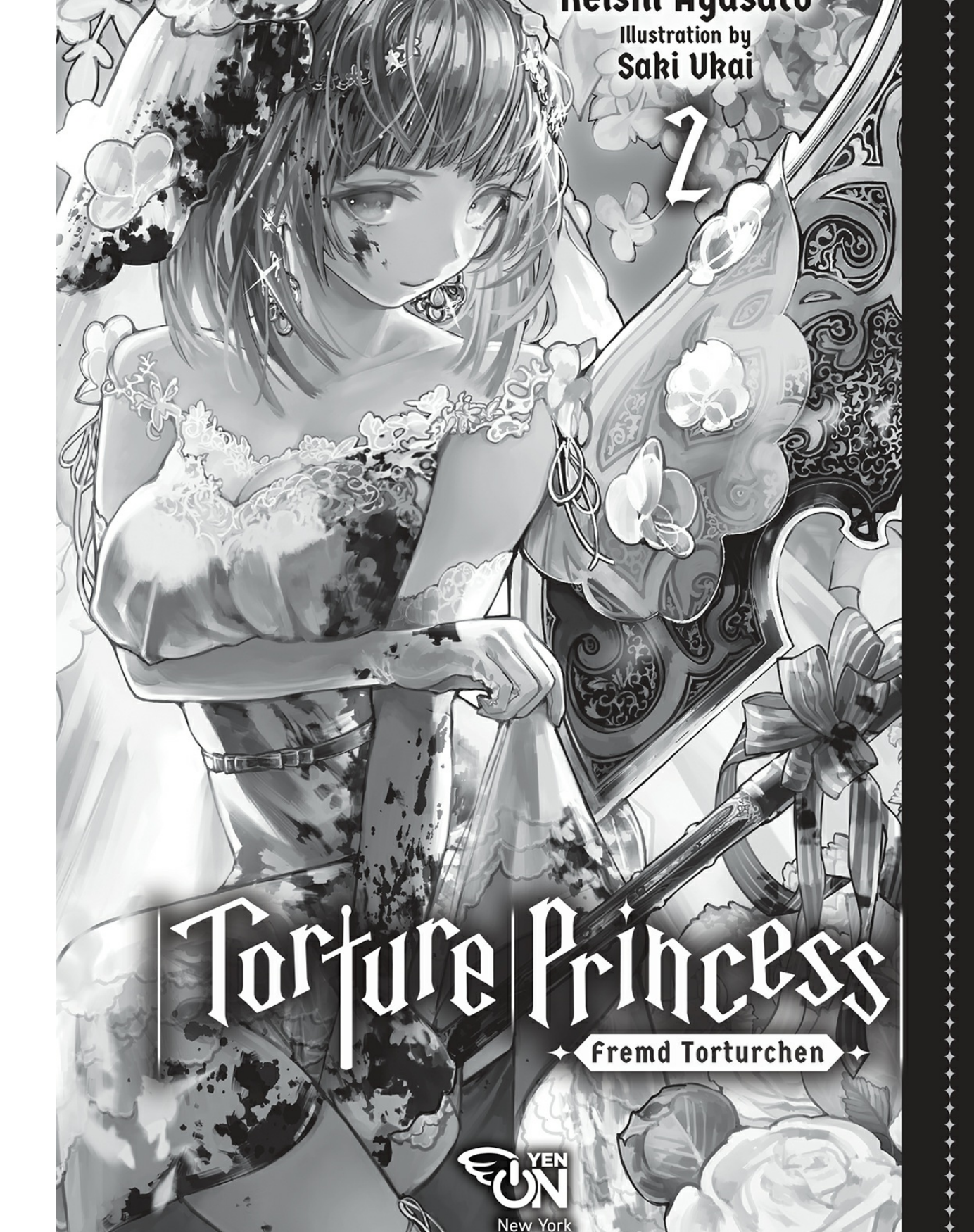
Today's menu Beef tongue confit, chicken liver mousse, pan-fried calf kidney with mustard sauce, peach soup, and tarte Tatin

Lady Elisabeth's compliment ... "Hina, you're a genius!" (words I am hardly deserving of)

Today's Master Kaito Today, as always, Master Kaito continued being the coolest, cutest, loveliest, kindest, most merciful, most gallant, most beautiful man in the world! May his radiance illuminate the very heavens!

Today's Master Kaito 2 Master Kaito standing on his tiptoes to clean the window is the absolute best!

I pray that tomorrow and the day after will continue on like this as well!



Keishi Ayasato

Illustration by
Saki Ukai

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Torture Princess

◆ Fremd Torturchen ◆


New York

Copyright

Torture Princess: Fremd Torturchen

Volume 2

Keishi Ayasato

Illustration by Saki Ukai

Translation by Nathaniel Hiroshi Thrasher

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ISEKAI GOMON HIME Volume 2 Fremd Torturchen

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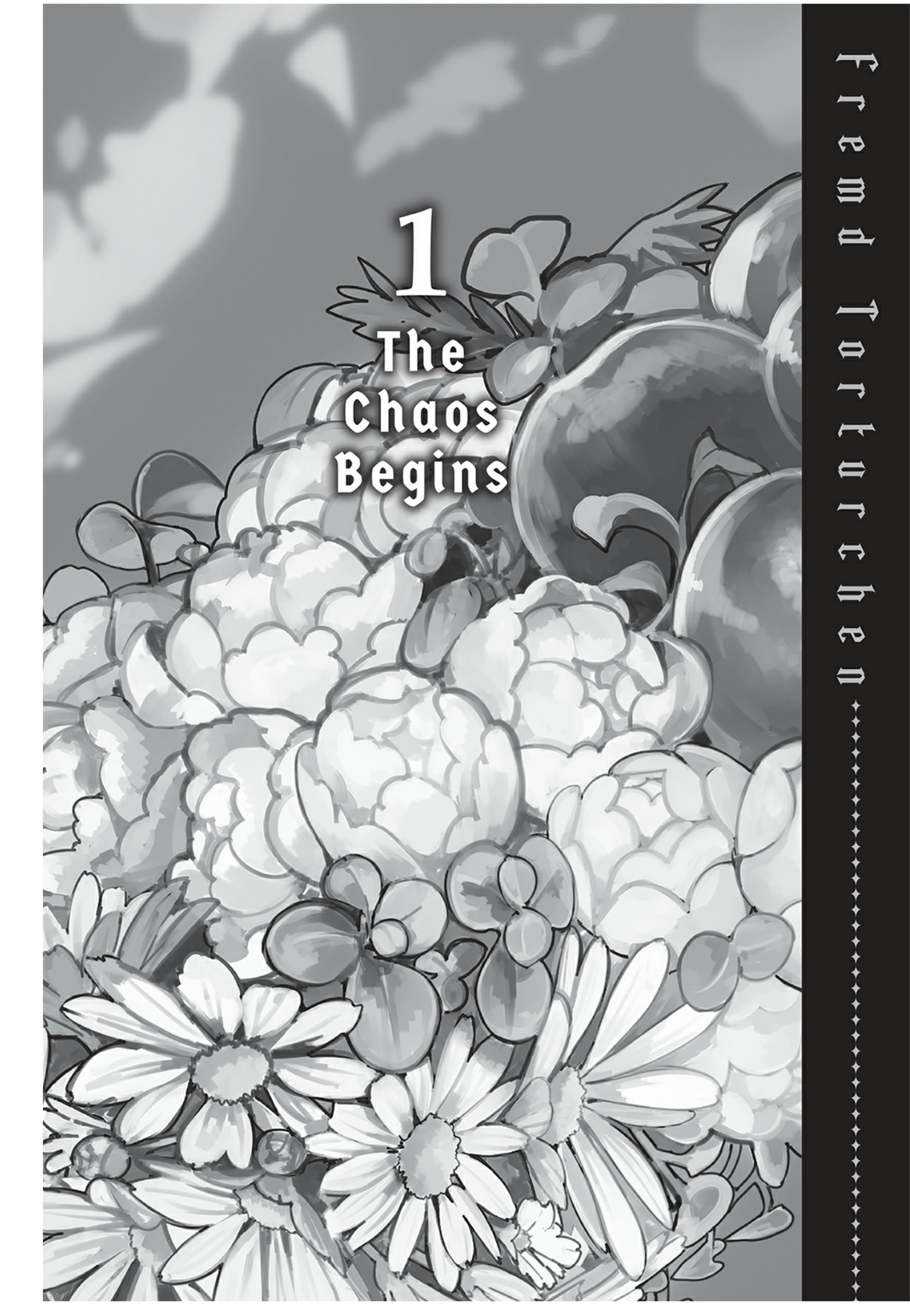
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1

The Chaos Begins

F r e m d T o r k u r c h e n

1

The Chaos Begins

The entire area was one massive graveyard.

A number of grave markers dotted the landscape, abandoned and forgotten by the living. They served as symbols of the dead resting beneath them, and they were stuck throughout the hill like a tragic pincushion.

At present, two figures were being buffeted by the frigid winds that ravaged the naked earth.

One of them was a girl of unparalleled beauty, clad in a lascivious black bondage dress.

Her pale arms and sides were exposed to the elements, and the leather belts providing her chest its sole means of coverage left her shapely breasts largely exposed. The black cloth wrapped around her hips flared out into a short skirt, and behind it, a layer of fabric with the inside dyed scarlet draped outward like a mantle. Her elegant legs, adorned in a layer of thin material, stood out even more sharply against the crimson backdrop. Strangely, though, her appearance did not register as provocative.

She wore her risqué outfit with the dignity of a queen in her regalia, and her crimson eyes flashed like rubies as she smiled.

“Well, well, what do you intend to do, my dear Duke? At this rate, I shall crush you like a worm, and the dead shall count you among their ranks. Come now, try to entertain me a little.”

Her laugh was cruel and arrogant as she made light of her adversary.

The foe was a demon. Twisted and hideous, it was demonic in every sense of the word.

Its form was a coffin made of flesh.

The coffin's lid reflected a gruesome glimmer while the interior was a throbbing mass of blood vessels and organs. Countless human arms extended from the coffin's sides, intertwining into a grotesque pair of wings.

That demon—the Duke—was the overseer of the massive graveyard, as well as its creator.

Long ago, a bloody conflict between beastfolk and humans had led to the people of the village neighboring the site to forbid anyone from setting foot on that land. That was what led the Duke to develop an interest in it.

As a result of using the land for his own nefarious purposes, the unbridled resentment of the dead had bled deep into the hill's soil. It would likely never be fit for human habitation again.

The Duke had buried countless people alive there.

He'd kidnapped them and sealed them within his coffin body, supplying them with air and minimal nourishment through a vent while slowly digesting them.

Still clinging to life while their bodies broke down, it was said that his victims would eventually give in to madness, their laughter interspersed with their screams. Their wails of agony would shake the hill like a thunderstorm, frightening all those who passed by. But over the past few weeks, the Duke had refrained from conducting his dreadful work, and at present, the voices could no longer be heard.

The Duke had been mulling over whether or not he should abandon his hill and flee.

He'd heard that the person who had brought down judgment upon the Kaiser, the strongest of all the demons, was closing in on his location. But because of the arrogance so often found among those who possess power surpassing human understanding, he ignored the pealing alarm bells in his head and stayed put.

That was a fatal mistake.

Now, he was under attack by a peerless sinner: the one person in the world

with the power to slaughter demons.

The sinner, the judge, the girl in black, continued her mockery.

“What’s the matter, Duke? Floating there in silence won’t change a thing, you know. Pleading for your life will prove just as futile. And I shan’t let you flee. The time for judgment has come. Here and now, you shall meet an unsightly end at the hand of a fellow sinner.”

“Elisabeth... Elisabeth... Damn you, wretched child!”

“You are aware of the position you’re in, yes? The hour of your demise is upon you. Look upon me and know death incarnate.”

The girl named Elisabeth smiled sweetly.

At that moment, the Duke let out a shriek and shot into the air like a missile. His arm wings spun in a bizarrely delicate fashion, carrying him high above the ground.

When he reached the apex of his flight, the Duke opened his coffin lid. Stakes, the same kind that had been used as grave markers, shot out. As they landed, the stakes ripped up the ground and sent bones and coffins flying. But with minimal footwork, Elisabeth avoided the stakes and escaped unscathed.

She moved with the graceful steps of a dancer, seemingly able to predict the trajectory of every rock and pebble.

Her black hair fluttered as she tilted her head. A stake whizzed past and buried itself in the ground far behind her.

She returned her head to its original position and then shrugged.

“.....Is that it?”

“ELISABEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEETH!”

The Duke screamed, in fear that his power would be insufficient and out of humiliation from her mockery.

The arms that comprised his wings clawed at the air in anguish. They then swelled, extended, and rushed at Elisabeth like a fleshy, many-headed serpent. Embedded in their palms were countless open mouths, all scrabbling to

consume her.

Elisabeth smiled and then moved her pale hand. Crimson flower petals and palpable darkness swirled together in the air.

She confidently plunged her hand into the swirling vortex and withdrew a long sword with a shining crimson blade.

“Executioner’s Sword of Frankenthal!”

Elisabeth’s voice rang out with the sword’s name. As she did, the runes etched onto its blade glowed.

You are free to act as you will. But pray that God shall be your salvation. For the beginning, the middle, and the end all lie in the palm of His hand.

She pointed the sword at the Duke. In accordance with her declaration, countless chains appeared out of thin air. They coalesced into a unified mass, almost resembling the form of a great snake, and then shot out at the Duke. They crashed into his wings, as though challenging them to a battle of strength. After a moment’s struggle, the chains pierced right through them.

Fingers, flesh, and a torrent of blood rained from the sky.

The Duke screamed and then truncated his wings in midair. Releasing a volley of stakes for cover, he frantically tried to use what remained of his wings to put distance between himself and his foe. But as she’d declared, Elisabeth had no intention of letting him get away.

She brought her glowing, crimson blade down as if performing an execution.

“Bull of Phalaris!”

In concert with her shout, the earth shook violently. A storm of darkness and flower petals whirled upon the hill’s peak.

Then a colossal brass bull appeared from within the dark gale, causing a tremor as it landed.

The bull’s mouth snapped open as it stood before the Duke. Like a fly getting swept up by a cow’s breath, the Duke was pulled inside. Simultaneously, crimson flower petals rained down upon the hill and set the grave markers ablaze.

The flames burned brilliantly as they began lapping at the bull's golden torso.

As a result, the Duke within it began burning.

A wail of agony eerily resembling a cow's moo bellowed from the mouth of the brazen bull. The screams, distorted by a special mechanism within the bull's head, belonged to the Duke. They continued for some time, much like his victims' screams that had once shaken the hill.

Elisabeth smiled upon hearing the Duke's ragged pleas among his screams.

"IT'S HOT! IT'S SO HOOOT! HELP! SOMEONE SAVE ME! ELISABETH! NOT LIKE THIS! JUST KILL ME! PLEASE LET ME DIE! IT'S TOO HOOOT!"

"...Don't be ridiculous, Duke. This is how torturers meet their ends. Those screams of yours are the perfect adornment for the death of a tyrant—and besides, why bother begging for your life? As if there were a chance I'd pay you the slightest heed—who exactly do you think I am?"

Playing the part of the calm, impartial executioner, Elisabeth rejected him without hesitation. As she waited for his fat to melt off, his flesh to burn, and his bones to glisten like jewels from the heat, she made her full introduction.

"I am the Torture Princess, Elisabeth Le Fanu. I am the proud wolf and the lowly sow."

Perhaps the last of his sanity had burned away in the flames, because toward the end, his agony had given way to mirth.

The Duke's loud laughter, amplified further by the Bull of Phalaris, eventually ceased.

Elisabeth then snapped her fingers, and the flames died down. The Bull of Phalaris, too, transformed into crimson flower petals and vanished. Out from the space it once occupied came a mass of black feathers, proof of the demon's death.

The feathers burst into blue flames and then burned away into nothingness. Elisabeth closed her eyes. She turned to the sky—as if reflecting upon the deaths of the Duke and his victims—before speaking.

"Now then, it's time for lunch!"

“Yes, ma’am! I’ve been standing by!”

“Wait, hold up. You’re giving me emotional whiplash.”

Elisabeth’s declaration elicited two responses: one cheerful and the other exasperated.

Suddenly, a silver-haired maid carrying a basket appeared from the foot of the hill. She wore an adorable maid’s cap and clutched the hem of her classic long skirt as she ran. Following behind her was a young man with grim eyes.

The skinny young man, Kaito Sena, wore an unflattering butler uniform. His faded brown hair matched his eyes, and he appeared dejected as he hurried to Elisabeth’s side, ravenous though she was.

He was a mere human—one who had died once already—yet he pledged his service to the Torture Princess, Elisabeth Le Fanu.

And there was a profound reason why he worked for her.

It all began back in another world. *The world in which he was murdered.*



Following a lifetime of abuse at the hands of his biological father, Kaito Sena’s life reached its end after a mere seventeen years and three months.

His death was as meaningless as that of a worm—a death most pitiful, most unseemly, most cruel, and most gruesome.

Ordinarily, there is no life after death. But because his soul was summoned to another world, Kaito received an opportunity. In truth, he had no desire to be brought back to life. Nevertheless, as soon as he was made flesh again, he was forced to serve an overbearing master.

This master was the very person who had summoned him: the Torture Princess, Elisabeth Le Fanu.

She had the pride of a wolf and was as low as a sow, a sinner ordered by the Church to butcher fourteen ranked demons and the people who had formed contracts with them. Once she was finished, she herself was destined to face execution. After being forcibly resurrected and experiencing a number of events, Kaito had made the choice to continue serving her.

Throughout Elisabeth Le Fanu's bloody life, she was accompanied by a single foolish servant.

He had made the choice to live a life that would bring about such a tale.

And as for the present day, Elisabeth's demon hunt was proceeding smoothly.

"This is deeeeeeeeeeeelicious!"

Having taken large bites of her sandwich and stuffed her cheeks, Elisabeth cried out like a child.

Elisabeth's favorite food was entrails, so the sandwich ingredients followed that trend.

Atop savory, toasted buns sat thickly cut foie gras sandwiched between fresh onion and tomato, all adorned with a red wine sauce. Slices of baguette became vehicles for heaps of liver pâté and figs drenched in honey and sprinkled with black pepper. The basket also featured various palate cleansers such as vegetable marinades and egg-based dishes, making its contents a veritable culinary flower garden.

Elisabeth was beaming, her expression absent of any of the cleverness or ruthlessness it bore just moments before. One could practically make out cat ears bobbing happily up and down atop her head.

The silver-haired maid beside her hoisted a bottle of white wine and flashed an elegant smile.

"As you are Master Kaito's master, Lady Elisabeth, I feel blessed that my cooking suits your tastes."

"Indeed, Hina, you are without peer in the culinary arts! Kaito may be unable to cook, as he appears to be committed to his uselessness, but activating you may be the one act I can actually praise him for!"

"Hey, I feel like I've been pulling my weight around here. I mean, I've been doing all sorts of things."

"Ah, 'tis all in your imagination!"

"All in my imagination, huh? Is that right?"

With an expression that practically screamed *fine, whatever*, Kaito bit into his sandwich.

Due to his harsh upbringing, Kaito never had the privilege to pick and choose when it came to food. As long as it wasn't tainted with laundry detergent or drugs, he could eat just about anything. But even though he typically didn't care about what he ate, he found Hina's cooking to be quite tasty. As he finished eating, the maid peered at him out the corner of her glittering emerald-green eyes.

"How was it, Master Kaito? Was it satisfactory?"

"Yeah, it was really good. Impressive as always, Hina. You being able to handle the cooking day in and day out is a huge load off my back."

"Oh, oh, Master Kaito! Being constantly by your side and cooking for you every day... What a splendid coincidence, those are the things that bring me the most joy! I consider them to be my greatest victories!"

"What in the blazes are you two going on about?"

"Unfortunately, while I can't speak for her, I'm not really saying much of anything."

As he gave his answer, Kaito patted Hina's head over her maid cap as she giggled, "Master Kaito, Master Kaito!" and smiled in delight. She looked to be on the verge of sprouting a puppy tail and wagging it back and forth.

Hina was an automaton that Kaito had activated. When she was first activated, Kaito had selected "lovers" as their relationship, and as a result, a roaring flame of passion had been sparked within her. However, according to Hina, her love for him was genuine, welling up from deep within her soul to surpass the framework it had been initially set in.

And her love for him had never once faltered.

As she giggled and hugged Kaito, Elisabeth sat beside them, nodding as she held a wineglass in one hand and polished off a second and third sandwich.

"Ahh, another demon exterminated and a splendid lunch to top it off! Ah, how wonderful it is, washing down rich foie gras with crisp white wine!"

“I made sure to prepare a dry wine thoroughly chilled with spirit ice today, ma’am!”

“Well...yeah, I’m with you. This isn’t half-bad.”

If not for the fact that we’re in a graveyard and the Duke just burned up here, that is, Kaito thought to himself.

Of all the venues they could have chosen for a picnic, the three of them chose to eat right atop the hill where the Bull of Phalaris had just disappeared.

True, they were sitting on the blanket Hina had laid out, but that didn’t change the fact that this was the very place where the Duke and his victims had died. However, Elisabeth simply scoffed at Kaito’s downcast expression.

“What are you on about? This land may be forbidden, but the less superstitious members of the townsfolk actually come here to relax quite often... Of course, as a result, they were the first to fall victim to the Duke... But my point stands. There is no disputing the excellence of this view nor how pleasant the wind feels. However, once we leave, the corruption will cause this place to be sealed off. True, this place has accumulated too much resentment, but it is a shame nonetheless.”

“I mean, you’re not wrong...”

“Having shed no tears, our prayers mean nothing. This is a funeral of sorts. Now drink, Kaito.”

“Whatever you say, boss. I guess you’re right, though. No tears I shed nor prayers I offer would mean anything at this point.”

“We have dessert today as well! All manner of fruit tarts! Lady Elisabeth, if you please.”

Hina retrieved a smaller basket and removed the lid. Elisabeth, eyes sparkling, began making her selection. Hina watched over her with a sisterly expression. Gazing at their intimate exchange, Kaito let out a small sigh.

Then he looked up at the pale-blue sky. Twisted as their circumstances were, at the moment, things were peaceful. Everything was going smoothly. The day-to-day life he’d longed for was safe—and that was precisely why a bitter sense

of anxiety gnawed at his chest.

That's right—things are going too smoothly.

Vlad Le Fanu had been contractor to the Kaiser, the greatest of the fourteen demons.

After she'd defeated him, her fated opponent, Elisabeth's demon hunt had proceeded without a hitch.

A few days ago, she'd defeated the Grand Governor, a foe even weaker than the Duke. While getting to the battle had been a bit of a struggle, it could be said that the fight itself was completely one-sided.

In this world, fourteen ranked demons—the Knight, the Governor, the Grand Governor, the Earl, the Grand Earl, the Duke, the Grand Duke, the Marquis, the Grand Marquis, the Monarch, the Grand Monarch, the King, the Grand King, and the Kaiser—had descended to the earth by forming contracts with humans. Upon fusing with their contractors, they would twist their bodies into grotesque forms in exchange for granting them immense power.

Demons derived their strength from the lamentations of God's creations, in particular the suffering of humans. Because of this, demons and their underlings had brought harm to people all across the land.

The higher the rank, the stronger the demon. The lowest ranked, the Knight, could handily rout any army other than paladins specially equipped by the Church. The highest ranked, the Kaiser, was unmatched by any human in the world.

Aside from one woman, one who accumulated pain from her entire fiefdom in order to wield demonic power surpassing that of the demons themselves—Elisabeth Le Fanu, the Torture Princess—that is.

A few days ago, she had defeated the Kaiser, an opponent with whom she possessed a deep connection.

Having defeated her strongest foe, it was possible that none of the rest would pose a challenge for Elisabeth. But that was problematic for Kaito.

After subjugating the fourteen ranked demons, the Torture Princess was to be

executed for slaughtering her subjects and countless other innocents. In a sense, every step she took toward completing her mission was like another step up toward the gallows. And as her servant, Kaito was slated to receive an inquisition before following her down the same path.

He'd taken all that into account when he'd chosen to continue serving her. However, he'd just as soon not rush up those steps. He spoke gravely, his voice echoing with the weight of his unease.

"Hey, Elisabeth?"

"What do you want, Kaito? This pomegranate tart is mine, I'll have you know. Hmm? That face you're making... What an incorrigible fellow you are. Fine then, I shall grant you a single bite. Watch yourself, though. Should you do the unthinkable and take too large a bite, you shan't escape with a mere flogging. I would have no choice but to summon a cat-o'-nine-tails, and—"

"That's not what I'm after. Trust me, it's all yours. Anyway, you beat the Kaiser, right?"

"Indeed, I did. Hu-hu-hu-hu, and what a weak fellow that Vlad turned out to be. Hu-hu-hu-hu-hu."

"Please stop laughing like that. You're freaking me out. But anyway, you beat the Kaiser, who should more or less be the strongest of the bunch... Doesn't that mean the rest of them aren't going to be a match for you? At this rate, the demon hunt will be over like—"

"Fool. That line of thinking is carelessness."

Elisabeth bit into her tart, her response as sharp as a blade.

Her mischievous, innocent expression from a moment ago had vanished without a trace. What replaced it was the stern face of a seasoned warrior. Kaito's eyes widened.

She licked her crimson lips, instantly blowing away the relaxed atmosphere as she went on.

"Vlad had been shackled by the Church, and on top of that, he hadn't fused with the Kaiser. If you recall, Hina and I were no match for the Kaiser himself,

top-ranked demon and superlative hound that he was; we obtained victory when I was summoned to Vlad's location so I could kill him directly. Had he and the Kaiser unified as one, we would likely have had no way of surpassing him."

"Really?"

"Vlad more or less perished in service to his sense of aesthetic. After all, he was the sort of man who would rather die than abandon his pride... But while the Kaiser vanished due to losing his catalyst, Vlad, we have no reason to expect such favorable results from the rest. While I doubt any other demon's strength is on par with the Kaiser's... In particular, I lack any sort of information on the Grand King."

"The Grand King?"

"The next highest ranked, after the Kaiser. Its contractor trusted Vlad and none other. Acting as Vlad's daughter, I was made to attend a number of the demons' gatherings, but I met them not once... The more I consider it, the more questions this foe raises. 'Tis a situation I'd just as soon not be in."

Elisabeth muttered to herself as she bit into the next tart. Berry jam oozed out of it, staining her lips red. She licked voraciously at her pale fingertips, deep in thought, and then turned to look at Kaito.

"Hmm? Are you not going to eat that?"

"Huh? Oh. No, knock yourself out."

"Mm. No matter the battle, information is essential... This crust is truly excellent... And there is merit to doing our research beforehand... The sweetness and sourness are perfectly balanced... If only we had some data... 'Tis exquisite how the cream just melts in your mouth... Upon second thought, it would have been prudent to do the searching earlier."

"Um...I think your food critique and your train of thought are getting mixed up."

"It's decided. We'll set off as soon as I am done eating."

Tossing a morsel topped high with custard cream into her mouth, Elisabeth declared her intentions. Hina, having just cleaned up the glasses, cocked her

head to the side. Beside her, Kaito raised a hand to ask a question.

“When you say ‘set off,’ where exactly are we going?”

“That should be obvious. The Grand King had but one acquaintance: Vlad. So we will go to his castle. Given his personality, he likely filled the castle with things from his secret storehouse in order to make it more livable after he fled from the Church and returned to my hometown.”

Kaito thought back to the events of a few months prior.

Back at Vlad’s castle, deep in Elisabeth’s hometown, the two of them had fought tooth and nail against Vlad. Even now, with the fight over, the castle and its surrounding ghost town were firmly blockaded.

Elisabeth grabbed the final tart as she stood.

“There may yet be precious information left there.”

Her proclamation was punctuated by a bite of grape tart.



In one sense, Elisabeth’s prediction had turned out to be correct, yet in another, it had turned out to be completely off the mark.

“Grr, damn you, Vlad, damn you!”

“Welp... Can’t say I didn’t see this coming.”

It was true that Vlad had brought a number of things with him to the castle. However, they had predominantly been furniture for decorating Elisabeth’s childhood bedroom, cookware, curios, and the like. While there were also magical trinkets and tools for creating automatons, there was nothing that seemed like it would offer a connection to his demonic comrades.

As Elisabeth violently rummaged through the desk in Vlad’s room, Kaito looked through the jewelry cabinet.

As he gazed at its luxurious contents, he thought to himself with a bit of dejection. *Well, y’know... He didn’t really seem like the type to be super-invested in his comrades.*

Behind Kaito, already willing to call it a day, Elisabeth was pulling tomes—

recipe books, by the looks—off the shelf and hurling them to the floor.

“Damn that man! Making light of me to the bitter end, I see! He disgraces the name of commander of the demons, bringing nothing with him but goods to support his lavish lifestyle!”

“Man, it really does feel that way, doesn’t it?”

“I’d known that the Church had rounded up all the automatons, but every other magical good is fixed such that only he could use them!”

“Hey, is it possible he was just being careful not to leave behind anything that was related to the other demons?”

“Ha! As if he was a man who would spare a thought for such considerations. No doubt he simply ignored those who did not spark his interest— *Bwah!*”

As she complained, Elisabeth pulled hard on the handle to one of the desk’s drawers. When she did, a black piece of cloth shot out from within and wrapped itself around her head.

“Wh-what is this? Gah!”

Elisabeth collapsed into a black lump. But based on how energetically she was rolling about, it didn’t seem like she was in any immediate danger. Hina abandoned her investigation of the bed and made her way over to Elisabeth to try and extricate her.

“Are you all right, Lady Elisabeth? Hmm, no, it doesn’t appear that way. I’m going to pull you out now, so please be patient. Hrgh!”

“Wh—grff... Hina... Hold it, that hurts, be gentler, geh!”

“Hey, take it easy, you two.”

After calling out to them half-heartedly, Kaito returned to his task. He brushed a golden chess piece to the side as he returned an intricate bee-wing brooch to where he’d found it.

All this stuff looks like it’d fetch a pretty high price, but I guess that’s about all it’s good for...huh?

Kaito’s hand stopped in its tracks, and he squinted. Amid the jewels sat an

ornate black box. For whatever reason, it caught his attention, and he reached out for it. But when he opened it, he found the deep velvet interior was empty.

...Was it just my imagination?

He began to close the lid. Right when he was about to, blue letters floated into the air.

For my dear successor.

“...What?”

He was sure that the box had been empty, but now it appeared to house a transparent stone of unknown material. Opalescent lights dappled across its surface, and a blue rosebud sat sealed within it. Black feathers fell like snow around its tightly closed petals. It was like a little magical snow globe.

“...Wait, is this...?”

Kaito thought back to when he'd seen Vlad use magic. In contrast to Elisabeth, Vlad's magic had employed blue roses. Furthermore, black feathers were the symbol of demons.

Kaito extended his hand and nervously grabbed hold of the stone. A familiar warmth spread across his palm.

He frowned. The warmth was akin to that of a small flame, yet seemed somehow alive, just like a soul squirming within a golem.

“Elisa—”

As he was about to call out to her, Kaito closed his mouth. After hesitating a few moments, he wrapped the stone in a handkerchief and slipped it into his pocket. Then, as if nothing had happened, he turned back around.

“It's all right, Lady Elisabeth, just a little more and I'll have you out. Hrgh!”

“No, no, wait, if you pull on that bit, you're likely to take my head with it, hey, Hina, for the love of—”

A great tragedy threatened to rear its ugly head. Frantic, Kaito ran over to prevent it.

He placed a hand on Hina's shoulder to get her to back off a bit and then

called out to the writhing mass.

“Hey, Elisabeth, you still alive in there?”

“Just what do you think you’re doing? Hurry up and save me, Kaito! A bit longer like this and I may die!”

“Seriously? Well, that doesn’t sound good.”

Kaito carefully untangled the bits of cloth caught on the ornaments adorning Elisabeth’s arms. Hina cleared her throat in apology and then pulled once more with strength unbefitting her thin arms.

“Hrgh! How did I do that time, Lady Elisabeth?”

“*Huff, huff...* Good...good work, Hina! Now, with this opening...”

Elisabeth successfully rolled out from within the cloth, crawling across the floor on all fours. Seemingly unaware of the seductive way she was arching her back, she shook her head, causing her beautiful black hair to tumble out of place as she yelled.

“*Vlaaaaaad!* That infernal device was a tool designed to train pets not to eat outside of mealtime! That wretched man, he must have expected me to open that drawer without permission and set it up in order to harass me... Enough of this; we’re leaving! There’s nothing of use to be found here!”

Finally reaching her boiling point, Elisabeth stood up and stormed off. But upon reaching the entrance, she suddenly stopped and turned to face the wall on her left.

“Wait—come to think of it, perhaps there is something here that we can make use of.”

Abruptly, she grabbed a decorative sword off the wall. Its blade was needle thin and surrounded by a beautiful spiral of melted ruby. Who knows how it was crafted.

It didn’t appear to be suited for actual combat. As Kaito reached that conclusion, Elisabeth swung the sword and whispered:

“—*La* (burn).”

With a noise like water evaporating, the rubies transformed into flames. The flames flickered and gave off heat, as though someone had breathed life into them.

Elisabeth flourished the burning sword and offered the grip to Kaito.

When he gingerly accepted it, the flames immediately froze and returned to their ruby state.

“Whoa, what’s up with that...? That’s kinda cool. What’s the deal?”

As Kaito poked at it, Elisabeth’s expression became deadly serious.

“Kaito, have you any desire to learn magic?”

“Wait, magic? What are you talking about? C’mon, I can’t use magic.”

“Cast away your doubt. As my puppet, my mana-rich blood flows through you. And did Vlad not ask you to become his successor?”

Losing his voice for a moment after thinking back to that time, Kaito nodded. Elisabeth extended a pale arm and touched his chest. She tapped above his heart with a polished black nail.

“For a madman, Vlad was quite rational. His thoughts may have been warped, but his judgment was sound. From the moment he met you, no doubt he realized how high your affinity for demonic energy was... While I have no intention of feeding you demon flesh, there should be merit in having you learn the foundations of magic. Not that you’ll be able to freely draw out the mana in my blood, that is. But you should be capable as far as rudimentary dark magic goes.”

Elisabeth bobbed her head up and down. Kaito pressed a hand against his heart.

It was true that Elisabeth’s blood was coursing through his body. The matter of whether or not he could use it aside, as far as latent magical energy went, the amount he possessed was far above that of the average person.

“Even with Hina by your side, you yourself are as powerless as always. Now, give me your arm.”

“My arm? Here.”

“This will sting.”

Speaking briefly, she ran her finger across it. Crimson flower petals gathered and then stabbed deep into Kaito’s palm.

At the same time, a figure appeared behind Elisabeth with blinding speed. She calmly raised her hands.

“Come now, Hina; pain is a necessary ingredient in dark magic. I’ll have to ask you to overlook this much.”

“...In the future, I ask that you please obtain his permission in advance. I hold deep affection for you, Lady Elisabeth, but should you harm my dearest beloved, I will kill you without hesitation. Please bear that in mind.”

Murmuring in a low voice, Hina withdrew the knife she’d reflexively pressed against the nape of Elisabeth’s throat.

Elisabeth shrugged, took the sword from Kaito, and then once more offered him its handle.

“Now then, the first lesson. Take this with your wounded hand and then use the blood as a medium to activate the magic within the sword. ’Tis the same technique as when you circulated mana through the summoning circle carved on your chest.”

“All right, I’ll give it a shot.”

Kaito obediently took the handle from her. Its rough ornamentation caused his wound to throb. But after the years of torturous abuse he’d endured, that degree of pain hardly even registered to him.

The same technique as when I circulated mana through the summoning circle, huh? Do I need to use more blood or something?



He gripped the handle even tighter, intentionally hastening his bleeding. Red droplets welled up from his palm.

He thought back to the sensation he'd felt when his wounds had been so full of mana that they'd felt like they were burning, and fortunately, his experiences in life had left him with the special talent of being unable to forget any information that was accompanied by pain. Using Elisabeth's blood within him as the catalyst, he imagined the sensation of burning and whispered:

“—*La* (burn).”

Immediately, the rubies became dancing flames.

“I knew you could do it, Master Kaito!”

“Oh-ho, quite the show for your first time! You're rather quick on the uptake!”

The two commended him. As he responded to their praise, he turned his attention to the stone in his pocket. The moment he'd understood how to activate magical devices, it had pulsed, as if to entice him.

If I'm right, then I've got a pretty good idea of what this is.

“Well, even for a first lesson, that was just the beginning of the beginning. From here, Hell awaits you. There's no point dillydallying. Once you've pilfered anything that looks useful from here, we'll return to the castle and begin your special training!”

“I mean, I'm definitely down to learn how to fight back against the demons. But I'd appreciate it if you could take it easy on me.”

“Oh, that would be unthinkable!”

“When you say ‘unthinkable’...”

After healing the wound on Kaito's hand, Elisabeth strode gallantly into the hallway. Hina and Kaito followed after her.

The three of them made a pass through the other rooms, collected various tools and weapons, and then left through the castle gate.

They passed through the town littered with human bones as they made their

way to the location where the teleportation circle was linked. Elisabeth clicked her heels atop the cobble pavement, and the crimson magic circle rose up once more. Red flower petals scattered through the air and formed a wall surrounding the three of them. The petals melted together as they swirled, transforming into blood.

When the cylindrical curtain of blood fell, the three of them had vanished from the town.

They'd safely made their way to the basement of Elisabeth's castle, where the teleportation circle was affixed.

After traveling through corridors reeking of must and echoing with a sound resembling moaning, the three of them ascended the stairs to the castle proper.

"Shall we break for some tea? I believe there are a few tarts that have eluded my grasp."

As she spoke, Elisabeth opened the door to the dining hall.

The chandelier within let out a loud creak.

A chain was wrapped around it, a familiar individual hanging from it by his neck.



"Wh—?!"

The dark figure swayed back and forth, letting out cacophonous creaking each time.

Simply hanging there, the person looked almost like an ornament added to the chandelier. The chain glittered, wrapped around and around the figure's silver arms and biting deep into the neck.

The bones in that neck had snapped at a queer angle. There was no way this person could still be alive.

As Kaito and Elisabeth looked up at the tragic corpse, they both cried out.

""Butcher!""

The one who had been killed was the Butcher, a beastfolk merchant who

would come to Elisabeth's castle to sell her meat. His entire body was wrapped up in the tattered black cloak he constantly wore.

They couldn't make out his face, concealed as it always was by the shade of his hood. But even without seeing his expression, it was evident he was dead from the cruel shape his neck was contorted in.

Clasping her hand over her mouth, Hina murmured in shock.

"...Mr. Butcher? Why did this happen?"

"I have no idea... Man, what even happened here?"

Kaito shook his head. Why had he been killed? Who was responsible?

As the tension caused the three of them to cringe, the Butcher's corpse made a lazy revolution. He then called out in an energetic voice, as if responding to the doubts the situation had brought about.

"My friends, there is an enemy! An enemy is afoot!"

"The corpse spoke!"

"That's impossible!"

"His spirit must be restless!"

"Hmm, none of you seem particularly thrilled by the fact that I'm still alive. I feel oh so very loved at the moment."

The Butcher, still strung up, shook his body from side to side in protest. The magnificent chandelier creaked ominously as he waved the scaly arms peeking out from the bottom end of his cloak.

"...An arm? Wait, is that chain digging into your tail and not your neck?"

"Keen eye! While I may be upside down, I yet live! Just as the enemy was stringing me up, I inverted my body within my cloak! Then they left, not realizing they had hung me by my tail! My, my, that could have gone quite poorly for me."

"Wait, that doesn't sound possible; that's like a magic trick or something."

"If I wish to call myself the Butcher, surely I should be able to do that much."

“You’re blowing my mind here, man.”

The two of them exchanged laughs, glad that he had survived.

Then Elisabeth suddenly tilted her head to the side.

“Hold it, Butcher. You spoke of an enemy. Who was it that hung you up within my castle?”

“Ah, that I did! Madam Elisabeth, an enemy is attacking! Although as the Butcher, I must confess that I don’t much care for your fight against the demons one way or the other; as a matter of fact, it doesn’t hold my interest in the slightest. However—”

“With an attitude like that, death shall come knocking at your door sooner rather than later.”

“—*However*, should I encounter one myself, then the story changes considerably! A demon came to this very castle! And he emitted a rather malevolent aura at that! He said that he planned to string me up to announce his arrival and then await your return in another room... Hey, wait—please get me down before you go running offfff!”

As the Butcher shouted from behind them, Elisabeth and the rest returned to the corridor. She proceeded across the premises with wide strides.

Kaito called out from behind her.

“Do you know where the demon is?”

“Ha! Invading the castle of the Torture Princess is the act of an audacious fool. ’Tis but one place someone like that would choose—as the saying goes, impossible heights are coveted by smoke and the foolhardy alike.”

Spitting out her declaration, Elisabeth ran down the path lit by the stained-glass clerestory windows.

After making her way up the spiral stairs leading to the throne room, she threw open the massive double doors.

A gust of wind rushed out to meet her. The throne room was adorned with antique tapestries and an extravagant throne, giving it a dignified air. But ever since one of the Knight’s beasts had attacked, there was a wall that had been

completely destroyed.

And out of either laziness or stubbornness, Elisabeth had neglected to repair it.

There was someone sitting upon the throne, the pale-blue sky that peeked through the hole serving as a backdrop.

The person was a handsome young man with rosy cheeks and shoulder-length blond hair. His slender, feminine legs extended out from his short trousers and swayed from side to side as he played with a piece of fruit that he'd brought to the side table.

"And down the hatch...huh?"

He'd just cut the pomegranate in half, and his mouth was wide open. Then his amber eyes caught sight of Elisabeth.

Without even a hint of mercy, she called out.

"Pendulum!"

Crimson flower petals and darkness swirled in the middle of the ceiling. An enormous blade hanging from a chain dropped from it and let out a heavy-sounding noise as it froze in the air. It then swung in a wide arc, the glistening blade rapidly accelerating before it smashed the throne into tiny pieces. But when the dust settled, the boy's corpse was nowhere to be found among the wreckage.

Unnoticed, he'd somehow made his way over to the wall. The blade corrected its trajectory and then sped toward the boy's new location. But right before it could slice through him, he vanished a second time.

Elisabeth and company suddenly found themselves face-to-face with him.

"...Wh—?!"

Kaito gasped. But Elisabeth seemed to have anticipated this development.

She licked her lips and then raised her arm once more. As she did, the boy dropped to one knee so quickly that it seemed like the bones in his foot must have snapped. He knelt, making no effort to defend himself. It became evident that an unbecoming scarlet shawl was draped around his neck, as if to cover his

nape.

Elisabeth raised an eyebrow at her foe's unexpected action.

"What are you playing at, Governor?"

"It's been some time, Ms. Elisabeth Le Fanu, beloved and over-perfect daughter of Mr. Vlad. While I harbor no shortage of animosity toward you, as you can see, I have no desire to do battle with you. I have come today to invite you to my manor, O Torture Princess."

"What?"

"Here is your formal invitation, with a present to accompany it. P-please, please accept it."

The Governor pulled an envelope and a paper box tied up with a ribbon out of thin air and then proffered them to Elisabeth with a trembling hand. After she confirmed there was no sort of magical trap afoot, she frowned and took them from him.

Then the Governor suddenly rose, his strange movements evoking the sense of a cord being yanked up.

His features contorted in a soft, strange manner as he gave an awkward, clownish bow.

"P-p-please do come—I've been e-e-eagerly anticipating your arrival."

Without warning, he leaned all the way to the side. His smile the very picture of artificiality, he fell onto the floor and was swallowed up.

Elisabeth snapped her fingers, returning the pendulum to flower petals before crossing her arms.

"The Governor is the next weakest after the Knight, but there was something clearly off about him."

"Oh yeah, for sure. I thought so as well. What's up with the box?"

"Its contents appear to be...baked goods. Careful now—make sure not to touch them."

Within the box was a row of brightly colored cookies. They were plastered

with jam and looked quite tasty indeed. But in tune with her harsh voice, Elisabeth snapped her fingers.

The well-made cookies burst into flame in midair and then burned to ash.

“Among all the demons, he was the one who expended the most effort sucking up to Vlad. I know his ability. His is a power suited for assassination—the talent to turn any food he touches into poison or narcotics... Consequently, I expected him to stay hidden and out of my reach for as long as he could.”

“But wait, didn’t he just come to the castle, invitation in hand?”

“Aye, that he did. Why invite me, though? And when did he become so well versed in using teleportation circles?”

Her gaze fell to the invitation. Bluish-green runes flickered across its surface. No doubt they could be used to allow Elisabeth’s teleportation circle to connect directly to the Governor’s manor.

Kaito joined Elisabeth in frowning.

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Indeed, it doesn’t. But I do not intend to fall for his trap. Something lurks beyond it, something we need to verify soon. ’Tis naught but my intuition, though, simply the feeling I’m getting.”

Kaito and Hina both nodded in assent. They needed to find out who was pulling the Governor’s strings. Even though he’d agreed, an ominous feeling swirled up in Kaito’s chest.

I dunno why, but I don’t like how this is playing out.

He clicked his tongue in irritation. As he did, Hina pressed her hand to her mouth and gasped.

“If I may, before we set off, we really ought to let down the Butcher.”

““Oops,”” Kaito and Elisabeth said simultaneously.

Now that she mentioned it, they’d both completely forgotten about him.



When the three of them returned to the dining hall, they found the Butcher

swinging back and forth and back and forth and back and forth.

Clearly desperate, he seemed to be trying to bring down the entire chandelier.

“Hold it, Butcher. Don’t go breaking other people’s chandeliers now.”

“Come now—was it not inhumane to run off and abandon me? Was it not unjust? And to say nothing of getting me wrapped up in a fight I had nothing to do with. Madam, I must protest! Even if I should rot away to nothing, the second and third Butchers shall—”

“My apologies. Wait just one moment, and I shall have you freed. Hina.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Hina, having already fetched her halberd, flew up from the floor. Leaping into the air, she struck the chain.

Her sharp attack severed it in a single blow. His tail freed, the Butcher collapsed onto the floor.

Upon landing, he quickly retracted his arms and tail into his cloak like a turtle. Nimble squirming within it, he righted his clothes without his face ever becoming visible.

He stood, raising his arms in celebration, and then looked quizzically at the other three.

“Hmm? You all look so tense... And Ms. Maid already had her weapon on hand... Are the three of you off to somewhere dangerous?”

“Yeah, we’re heading for the manor of the demon who strung you up.”

“Oh my. If that is the case, Mr. Dim-Witted Servant, then do take care.”

The Butcher’s voice was unusually docile. Kaito met his gaze and silently asked what the matter was.

The Butcher drew his face close to Kaito’s and then whispered in a serious tone.

“It may seem a trivial matter, but...the intruder had a peculiar smell about him. The smell of foul meat.”

The Butcher spoke of how the scent gave him unpleasant premonitions.

Kaito couldn't help but agree.



When Elisabeth placed the invitation on her teleportation circle, it dissolved in a swirl of blood. The blue runes alone remained, drifting alongside the sanguine lines.

Elisabeth, Hina, and Kaito stood upon it. When they did, the circle turned blue and began spinning rapidly. Azure flower petals surrounded them. They melted together into cylindrical walls and then transformed into black feathers. The feathers shot up into the air and began vanishing.

"Listen, don't let your guards down. We'll be in constant danger from the moment we arrive."

"Got it."

"Understood, ma'am."

The black curtain disappeared, and as it did, loud laughter rang out.

Kaito and the others found themselves in a grand entrance hall, no doubt belonging to the Governor's manor.

A banquet was spread out before them.

"...What?"

The hall was filled to the brim with round tables, each one overflowing with food. A whole-roasted suckling pig sat atop the elaborate mantelpiece, and antique busts were being used as platters to hold pies. Corks shot through the air like bullets, and people were drinking wine and beer straight out of bottles and casks.

A beautiful lady made vulgar noises as she used sausages to scrape up what appeared to be a rich red tomato sauce. Beside her, a young man who looked like a farmhand was stuffing his cheeks with scarlet cakes. Many of the attendants were vomiting from overeating. The floor was covered with red sauces, half-digested food, and vomit, and people had trampled all the detritus down to a sticky paste.

The naked revelry was truly chaotic.

Vivid colors spread out before the three of them, with noxious aromas assaulting their nostrils and lively music beating in their ears. The clanging of silverware rang out to accompany this, as did a sound that resembled a herd of pigs chewing on scraps.

“What is this place?”

Looking out over the magnificent, hideous banquet, Kaito was taken aback. Beside him, Elisabeth silently surveyed the surroundings. Hina stepped forward to cover Kaito and then murmured softly.

“...Lady Elisabeth, this smell...”

“I’m well aware. There’s little need for us all to say it aloud.”

Suddenly, a kindly old woman and a young girl carrying a silver tray emerged from the banquet. Their mouths, stained red, broke out into friendly smiles.

The girl lifted the lid of her tray, revealing the potherb-decorated roast hare beneath it. The hare’s back was drizzled with red sauce as well.

The old woman’s eyes were out of focus, but she spoke kindly as she kneaded her hands.

“My, my, it appears we’ve received three more guests. Welcome to the Lord Governor’s banquet. Ever since we were invited here, we’ve been able to spend countless days feasting on splendid foods, cut off from the suffering of the world. Let’s all continue this magnificent feast together. Come now—eat to your heart’s content!”

She doesn’t seem like an underling. She just seems like an ordinary person.

All the people here drinking and partying, including the demi-humans and beastfolk among their ranks, had apparently come on the Governor’s invitation. The Governor had the power to turn food into poison and narcotics, but for the moment, none of the guests looked to be suffering from any fatal abnormalities. Though the food was likely addictive, that was all.

While pondering how to approach the situation, Kaito’s thoughts were cut off.

“La Guillotine, Saint of Beheadings.”

Elisabeth spoke in a low voice. Darkness and crimson flower petals materialized in response.

A white figure rushed past them and landed with a *gong*. The beautiful maiden raised its head.

The doll who'd been called a saint resembled the Iron Maiden yet gave off a decidedly different impression.

The saint wore a plain white dress, and its thick, straight silver hair draped down as it closed its eyes as if in prayer. Unlike the showy Iron Maiden, La Guillotine seemed to combine the fastidiousness and tidiness of a nun.

Elisabeth clicked her heels. The saint crossed its pale arms in front of its chest and then spread them out.

With a sharp noise, a pair of rectangular blades slid out of its arms. They swung wide across the hall, gently caressing the necks of all the people within, and then buried themselves in the far wall.

Blood sprayed everywhere as the people's heads fell from their shoulders.

"...Wh—?"

Kaito was dumbstruck.

As it stood in the middle of the shower of blood, there was no change in the saint's expression. It crossed its arms once more and then spread them out again.

As the heads rolled, the noise of the instrument someone had been playing stopped as well. The young girl's head lay beside the fallen roast hare. The old woman's head slid from her wrinkled neck and then plopped down onto the ground.

Elisabeth prepared to mercilessly click her heels a second time.

Returning to his senses, Kaito grabbed her shoulder tight.

"Elisabeth, cut it out! They're just ordinary people!"

"Indeed, and when ordinary people find themselves invited to a demon's banquet, what do you think becomes of them?"

“What are you talking—?”

“Look at what they were eating. Look *closely*.”

Spurred on by Elisabeth’s calm remark, Kaito ran his gaze across the round tables and then found himself at a loss for words.

Even under the rancid downpour of blood, the banquet’s guests were still gorging themselves. A plump man was shoving muffins into his mouth. He chewed on them with pleasure and then pressed down on his stomach after swallowing.

“Rgh... Ah, ah... Gah, gah, arrrrrrrrrgh!”

His eyes wide and blood and phlegm streaming from his nose, the man regurgitated a sickening substance.

Red vomit poured down upon the food.

Kaito had finally ascertained the true identity of the red sauce.

“...’Tis their own dissolved organs.”

Without hesitation, Elisabeth voiced the conclusion he’d just reached.

Racked with agony, the banquet’s guests vomited up their own organs, which had been dissolved by the powerful poison in the food. However, unable to resist the addictive nature of the demon’s feast, they continued gorging on the food along with their own ruined entrails.

The banquet laid out before them was Hell masquerading as Heaven.

“’Tis too late to treat any of them. The poison itself is incurable. Death is a mercy.”

Elisabeth made her declaration and then clicked her heels.

The Saint of Beheadings obeyed the Torture Princess’s cold command and swung its arms.

The heads of all in attendance went flying. The spray of blood painted the ceiling a vivid shade of red.

A number of heads rolled across the ground like fruits, and the headless corpses collapsed.

Though Kaito desperately wanted to beg Elisabeth to stop, he restrained himself. As if in consideration for his feelings, Hina gently touched his arm.

Elisabeth returned the saint to petals and then strode forth among the corpses.

“Cease your dawdling. We need to seek out the Governor.”

“Yeah, I know. We gotta find him—find him so we can kill him.”

His voice thick with rage, Kaito followed after Elisabeth. The banquet now over, none raised a voice to stop them.

In order to kill the Governor, the three of them began making their rounds through the manor.



It didn't take long for them to realize that although the Governor ranked low among the fourteen, his deeds were no less horrifying. The Hell he had created didn't end at the entrance hall but continued on throughout the manor.

“This is messed up. I had no idea that it was gonna be this bad.”

After confirming the situation within, that was all Kaito could say.

In the dining hall, people covered in the Governor's spices were eating one another, all of them on the verge of death. The kitchen featured a man afflicted by poison, dead after cutting open his own chest and slurping at his innards in search of food. Down in the dungeon, a young mother had committed suicide after leaving a note detailing how she'd eaten her own baby. A young girl was slumped over a couch, her organs shredded after she'd eaten pastries filled with nails. And the courtyard's pool was filled with the bodies of children who had drowned in a sea of cake and suffocated.

As they made their way up the main stairs to the second floor, Elisabeth responded.

“The Governor is looked down upon as the weakest of the demons, his power even less suited for combat than the Knight's. He takes his frustration out on humans and schemes to gather their pain in order to grow stronger... He's akin to a child who tries to grow taller by taking in nutrients.”

“That’s all kinds of screwed up.”

“From the bottom of my heart, I agree with Master Kaito.”

Hearing Hina’s words, Kaito nodded mutely.

His rage had been so overwhelming that he’d achieved a strange calm. He searched for the Governor in absolute silence. But while every turn revealed a new victim, the most important young man was nowhere to be seen.

After going out of his way to give the Torture Princess an invitation, the Governor had vanished.

Where...where is he? Huh?

As he walked across the second-story cloister surrounding the entrance hall, Kaito scrunched up his face.

He smelled something rotten.

The hallway was filled with the fragrance of food, but the difference in that stench was conspicuous. The rest of the rooms and hallways on the second floor had the sweet smell of pastries and the savory scent of meat to cover up the stink of the corpses. But the smell drifting from the corner room on the second floor alone refused to be covered up.

Just before, Kaito and the others had confirmed where the smell was coming from as they made their rounds.

There was a single room on the second floor blanketed in the stench of decaying flesh.

Elisabeth had declared that it was most likely storing food designated for people with repulsive tastes. However, the room’s existence tugged at Kaito’s mind. His rage-enhanced mind selected freely from its available information, and the Butcher’s words floated to the surface of his thoughts.

“He had a peculiar smell about him. The smell of foul meat.”

“...The smell of foul meat.”

As he parroted the words, Kaito broke into a run. Not pausing to tell the others where he was going, he rounded one of the cloister’s corners and made

for a section of the floor, a room that wasn't connected to any other hallway. Like a faithful hound, Hina followed warily behind him. However, sensing that Kaito had thought of something, she said nothing.

When he opened the door, a putrid stench poured out into the hallway.

"Good God, this room!"

Kaito stood in the entryway of a lavish bedroom.

At its center, a massive heap of decaying meat was sinking into the canopy bed.

The sheets were stained a dark red and had been hardened stiff by the rotting fat, and the soiled room showed no signs of life. The window shutters were closed tight. But Kaito squinted as he took in the room's odd atmosphere.

Looking closer, he could see that the top of the mass of half-melted flesh was moving up and down. The lump of meat was breathing. Beneath its transparent surface, stagnant blood could be seen pumping through its veins.

Kaito took a step back in horror.

The mass of rotting meat...was alive.

"Foul...meat... Which means that's..."

"Master Kaito, what's gotten into you? What is this room?"

"What do you think you're doing? This room had naught but rotting meat in it."

Elisabeth had caught up with them. In response to their questions, Kaito shook his head.

Pointing at the hideous mass of flesh in front of them, he answered in a low groan.

"...That's the Governor."

"What?"

"That pile of rotting meat—it's the Governor!"

Elisabeth pushed Kaito aside as she dashed forward. As Hina ushered him

farther back, Elisabeth stabbed the mass with her finger. Her black fingernail dug deep in the flesh.

The mass quivered a little but offered no other reaction. Elisabeth pulled her finger free.

As she fiddled with the dark blood dripping from the wound with her finger, Elisabeth spoke in a puzzled voice.

“’Tis true; this thing certainly has demonic power running through it.”

“So it really is him?”

“Indeed... But the question then becomes why? When he visited the castle just now, he appeared as a hale young man, taking on a human form as contractors to demons are wont to do. Only when they release their power do they reveal their true, hideous forms.”

“Is that what that mass of flesh is?”

“Nay, it’s precisely because that isn’t the case that the situation is so odd... I’ve seen the Governor’s true form before. ’Tis a gray titan. Hideous as it is, it’s no mass of flesh... Is this the remains of the titan crushing in on itself? Its power is running wild... Perhaps the result of being unable to maintain its ego? What on earth happened here?”

Elisabeth crossed her arms, deep in thought.

Suddenly, the mass stirred.

Something that had been stuck to its skin fell off the bit resembling the nape of its neck. While it was discolored from the putrefaction fluids, it was still recognizable as the scarlet shawl that had been wrapped around the nape of his neck.

Beneath where the stained cloth had peeled off from, something silver glistened.

A decorative needle modeled after a brain was stuck deep in the nape of the Governor’s neck.

“That needle...”

As Elisabeth murmured, the heap of rotting flesh began loudly breaking apart.

The noise it made was horrible, and as it crumbled, the rotting meat—the Governor—opened its eyes.

He looked up at Elisabeth, his eyes like those of a dead fish, and then opened his huge mouth wide and let out a monstrous roar. As he did, his remaining teeth tumbled out.

Elisabeth snapped her fingers. Iron stakes appeared and then whizzed through the air toward the Governor's open mouth. Beside them, something dark and red slipped out from within the mass of flesh.

Hina, not letting her guard down for a moment, quickly brandished the ax end of her halberd. Then she spoke.

"...What?"

It was something nobody could have expected.

It was the Governor's heart.

Elisabeth's stakes were unerring in their aim, and they impaled the Governor and ripped through his back. As they did, Hina tried to cut the heart in two, but it ruptured on its own before she could.

The dark red viscera pitifully disintegrated.

Then the blood flowing from within it transformed into hundreds of arms. The arms dodged around Hina as they grabbed for Elisabeth.

"Wh—?!"

The arms lovingly embraced Elisabeth and squeezed her tight. The discolored poison blood sank into her pale skin. Runes, similar to the Church's shackles, carved their way into her flesh.

Elisabeth, eyes wide, collapsed to the floor. Hina propped up her shoulder.

"...Hah, hah..."

"Lady Elisabeth! Hang in there!"

"Elisabeth!"

Kaito ran to her side. Meanwhile, the Governor, having lost his heart and been run through by stakes, wept uncontrollably as he breathed his last. The rotting meat stopped moving and then transformed into a large quantity of black feathers.

He vomited up his own heart?

Perplexed by the situation, Kaito knelt beside Elisabeth as Hina held her shoulder tighter. Elisabeth spoke in a quiet voice, her sullied skin trembling like that of a violated maiden.

“Rgh... Ah... This...this...can’t be...”

Then they heard a rattling noise as the sound of chains rang out.

“*Sacrifice*—a spell that, in exchange for a demon’s heart, can partially seal away demonic powers.”

Kaito went stiff and then spun around.

But even before he could confirm who was there, deep inside he already knew.

Something terrible was coming.

A woman with the majesty of a king was ascending the stairs.

She wore a crinoline dress that made luxurious use of scarlet fabric. Her skirt’s front half was left intentionally bare, leaving the unrefined birdcage-like frame visible. Within, her seductive, unnaturally white legs were on display.

A large group of collared underlings followed behind her, their straitjackets covering even their faces. Chains extended from their overly tight collars, all connecting to the rings the woman was wearing.

With her scarlet eyes and dress, she looked like a roaring flame when she laughed.

“The Governor’s manor is dreadful, isn’t it? Don’t you think it’s a fitting end for that child, dying as a heap of meat in the middle of his own playground? I wanted to crush his heart, which is why I invited you all here. Did you enjoy yourselves? If you did, I’m sure he’d have been pleased. Buffoonery is buffoonery precisely because it inspires laughter, no?”

“You witch... You used the heart of a demon, one of your own comrades?”

Elisabeth, still in agony, posed the question in a voice dripping with hatred.

The scarlet woman nodded brazenly and seemingly proud rather than ashamed.

“Precisely, Elisabeth. Up until now, I’d respected the lives of my comrades out of regard for my dear friend Vlad. But with his death, there will be no more of that. By consuming the lives of the weaker demons, I can use them for particularly effective attacks. Isn’t that just splendid? ...Oh my, how rude of me. I became so caught up in idle chatter, I neglected to introduce myself. My sincerest apologies.”

The beautiful woman smiled with all the composure and magnanimity of a queen. She gave an elegant curtsy.

As she did, she pulled on the chains connecting to her rings, causing the people behind her to bow deeply.

“I am the Grand King, Fiore.”

Her introduction complete, she raised her head and smiled. Kaito and Hina stood in awe of her elegant demeanor and overwhelming presence. Even so, they tried to protect Elisabeth when the Grand King made her declaration.

“Playtime is over, little princess—now, the chaos begins.”



Iron Maiden

One of the torture devices Elisabeth uses. Human-shaped. Usually smiles affectionately, but upon being attacked, her blue eyes reverse and become bright red and her face twists into an expression of hatred.





2

The Kaiser's Contractor

F r e a m d T o r l o r c h e n

2

The Kaiser's Contractor

Elisabeth's castle sat atop a desolate hill, surrounded on all sides by dense forest. It was constructed firmly out of unworked stone, making it feel less like a castle and more like a fortress.

Within one of its rooms—a cold room wholly unfit for relaxation—Elisabeth lay in shallow slumber atop a finely constructed yet modest bed. Sweat beaded across her forehead.

Hina took a cloth cooled with ice water and gently wiped the sweat away.

As he leaned against the hard stone wall, Kaito observed Elisabeth's condition.

She seemed frail, a far cry from her normal haughty, prideful behavior. She resembled a child, sick in bed with a fever. But compared to how she was a moment ago, her breathing was much more stable.

Hina blinked her emerald-green eyes as she turned to face Kaito. He silently gestured with his chin, beckoning her into the hallway. Careful not to make noise, the two of them left the room.

After waiting for Hina to close the door behind them, Kaito asked her a question.

“So what exactly is wrong with Elisabeth?”

“Well... I'm quite ashamed to admit it, but while I have stored within me all modern medical knowledge, I lack specialized treatment functions, so any hypothesis I could make would be imprecise at—”

“That's fine. I'm positive your opinion is far more useful than mine. Please let me know what's going on with her.”

“As you wish... It appears that Lady Elisabeth is suffering from a dramatic decline in the amount of mana within her body.”

Kaito nodded, Hina’s assessment aligning with his suspicions.

Having learned the basics of magecraft, he was better than he’d been before at understanding other people’s magical powers. Normally, Elisabeth gave off a sinister pressure as sharp as rose thorns, so cutting that even she herself was tormented by it. But now she seemed like a doll who’d had its insides scooped out.

“While Lady Elisabeth freely wields magic strong enough to defeat demons, her body consumes mana to protect itself in order to withstand its overuse. As a result, her current situation is no doubt quite painful for her... Oh!”

Suddenly, they heard a quiet groaning from inside the room. Hina and Kaito frantically rushed back in. Elisabeth was shaking her head and taking ragged breaths. Hina hurried to her side.

“Lady Elisabeth, my sincerest apologies. I’m back now.”

Little by little, Hina poured a decoction into Elisabeth’s half-open mouth. Kaito placed the towel back in the ice water, wrung it out, and then passed it to Hina. She thanked him and then wiped down Elisabeth’s slender neck.

There, too, ominous tracks pulsed. The red marring her pale flesh looked almost like an extra set of blood vessels beneath her skin.

...I’ve never seen her in this much pain... Dammit.

Biting his lip in frustration at his own powerlessness, Kaito thought back to the events from before she’d fallen asleep.



“La Guillotine, Saint of Beheadings!”

Propped up by Kaito and Hina, Elisabeth faced the Grand King and called out.

Dripping with cold sweat, she had summoned the torture device. Crimson flower petals and darkness swirled, and the white saint appeared to protect the three of them. It closed its arms and then opened them and set loose its rectangular blade. The Grand King forewent defense, simply yanking on one of

the chains in her hand. One of her underlings came flying forward.

He became the Grand King's shield, and his head and neck went their separate ways.

It was almost comical how abruptly his straitjacket-covered head rolled across the floor.

"Wh—?!"

As Kaito reeled in shock, Hina made her move. With flowing movements, she vanished from his side. Dropping as low as she possibly could, she slid into the Grand King's blind spot and swung her halberd diagonally upward. Not even looking at the blade, the Grand King pulled on her chains again.

Another underling flew forward, and another underling lost his head, which rolled across the floor.

Tired of waiting for their chains to be pulled, the rest of the underlings swayed from side to side.

"Tch!"

Her attack repelled, Hina decided not to pursue and instead fell back. The Grand King laughed uncomfortably.

"You're a reckless young lass, aren't you? It brings me back, but youth really is a troubling time."

The Grand King suddenly turned her gaze away from Hina and the saint. She removed the two chains connected to the dead underlings' collars. Her heavy crinoline dress shook as she stooped over and touched one of the corpse's straitjackets. The cloth melted away at her touch, and its arms fell free.

She took its hideous, sarcoma-covered hand in hers.

"You did well."

She whispered gently and then placed a ring on its ring finger with a kiss. The living underlings collectively groaned, seemingly in envy. Then, having lost interest, the Grand King tossed the corpse's arm aside and stood.

Her guard had been down throughout the entire series of actions, yet she

hadn't left so much as a single opening.

"Now, now, Elisabeth. Do you still intend to fight me? The Governor said it when he was under my needle's control, didn't he? *'While I harbor no shortage of animosity toward you, as you can see, I have no desire to do battle with you.'*"

"Ha, what a joke. Who'd believe the words of a seductress such as you?"

"Oh my, but I'm telling the truth. In order to win a fight to the death with the Torture Princess while she still has the power to summon La Guillotine, as well as one of Vlad's automatons, I would have no choice but to assume my demon-fused form... But I find that form laughably hideous, you see. And think of how my subordinates would feel if I were to discard my beauty now."

The Grand King drew a crow-feather fan from the cleavage of her voluptuous breasts and covered her mouth with it. She shook her head in refusal. After completing her innocent-seeming gesture, she heaved a heavy sigh.

"But alas, unlike Vlad, who brought about his own ruin, I'm a far more logical and self-interested individual. I am a woman, after all. If the necessity arises, I won't hesitate. See now, Vlad refused to fuse with his demon, whereas I'm already one with mine. But as much as I can, I'd rather not show off that hideous form—a woman has her pride, you know."

She thrust her closed fan toward Elisabeth, as if asking if she could appreciate that. Elisabeth didn't reply.

The Grand King acted as though she'd heard an answer regardless, though, and gave a light shrug.

"You're displaying your displeasure all over your pretty little face. Listen now, Elisabeth. Would you mind not constantly looking for openings like that? The fact that I'm not simply killing you all without regard for appearances may be due to pride, but it is a mercy as well. You're carrying rather important baggage, after all. Isn't that right, automaton girl?"

Gesturing at Kaito with her chin, the Grand King winked at Hina.

Hina readied her halberd, tension racing through her body as she prepared herself for whatever might come. She resembled a guillotine, blade ready to

drop at any moment. The Grand King licked her lips as she whispered to her.

“A lesson for you, young pup. You’re still young, so you might not understand, but love is something you keep hidden. It isn’t something you bare for the world to see, you know? Especially against a female opponent—otherwise, a wicked woman with a taste for other people’s men might just snatch him up.”

The Grand King cast a flirtatious glance at Kaito, and her pale hand moved. One of her rings, not attached to any of her underlings, shot out a chain. It hurtled toward Kaito at full speed.

The chain was right about to wrap around his neck when a thunderous noise rang out, and the chain was cut to pieces.

Hina had swung her halberd, cutting apart the chain and taking a chunk of the floor with it.

“Go die in a hole, you vixen.”

Her pupils dilated, Hina moved her legs. She hurled her halberd, and it spun as it sped at the Grand King. But she yanked on her chains once more, and another underling flew in to receive the blow in her place. There was the sound of a neck snapping.

The front of the underling’s straitjacket split open, and blood sprayed everywhere. Kaito and the rest momentarily had their vision blotted out by red.

Then a hand reached out from an unexpected direction and grabbed hold of La Guillotine’s hair.

“See, you lost your cool, didn’t you? How adorable you are, young lass. You seem difficult to take, so I’ll end things here for today—but next time, who knows? You may want to learn a thing or two about provocations in love affairs.”

Chuckling, the Grand King put force into the hand holding La Guillotine’s head. At some point, that hand had become nothing but bone, demonic and much larger than that of a human.

Its head buckling under the pressure, the saint’s skin began to split. The unseemly mechanisms within it became exposed.

The sound of creaking iron rang out.

“I’ll be taking this.”

The Grand King crushed the saint’s neck with her grotesque hand. The now-headless body collapsed on its side and transformed into rose petals.

Amid their crimson dance, the Grand King’s cheeks reddened, and she fanned herself with her crow-feather fan.

“Oh, good gracious. How improper of me. Please just pretend you didn’t see that arm.”

“Damn you, Grand King... Damn you, Fiore!”

“How pleasant it feels to hear you cry out my name, Elisabeth. Of all the demons you’ve killed, they were always the ones pitifully crying out yours, right? ...That’s plenty enough for me today.”

Her arm returning to that of a lady’s, the Grand King nodded.

She placed a ring on the ring finger of her freshly killed underling and then suddenly, as if bored, turned her back on Elisabeth and company. However, she turned her head back around and twisted her lips seductively.

“I hope we meet again, little princess—and as for you, lover boy, do try to get a bit stronger.”

The Grand King began majestically making her way down the stairs. Like pet dogs, her underlings obediently followed as she pulled on their chains. As the unsettling group finally faded from view, Elisabeth murmured in disgust.

“...What a vile woman. However, pursuing her is beyond me. I am quite certainly—”

“Elisabeth?”

“Lady Elisabeth!”

“—at my limit.”

As if the strings holding her up had been cut, Elisabeth collapsed on the spot. Crimson runes wriggled atop her pale skin.

Flustered, Hina and Kaito hoisted her up and carried her to the entrance hall.

Using the knowledge recorded in Hina, they activated the teleportation circle and somehow made their way back to the castle.

It was the first time the Torture Princess had ever had to beat a retreat after being face-to-face with a demon.



At the moment, Elisabeth was still sleeping in her room.

Although keeping her comfortable was about the extent of the treatment Kaito and Hina were capable of, her breathing had calmed down again. After confirming that Elisabeth was stable, Kaito turned his weary, wavering gaze toward Hina's back.

Then he looked back at Elisabeth, who was sinking into her bed.

"...Elisabeth."

After murmuring softly, he closed his eyes and frowned.

He thought back on everything that had just happened. He thought back to how innocent Elisabeth's expression had been as she stuffed her cheeks with food and how Hina had gently smiled beside her. He thought back to how the Grand King had sadistically laughed as she peeked out from behind her crow-feather fan. Suddenly, her expression blended together with the one his father had when he had tried to kill Kaito. While one had been much scarier than the other, they'd shared the same fundamentals.

They'd both thought of Kaito as a worm, vermin they could crush as they pleased.

Finally, Kaito turned to face the phantom of a red-haired boy. The boy looked at him worriedly, and Kaito muttered a few words.

"I know, Neue... It's too early to panic. But even so..."

As he opened his eyes, Kaito loosened his grave expression.

He calmly rose from his chair and then called out to Hina.

"Hey, Hina. It doesn't look like there's much more for me to do here. And because both the butler and the maid were occupied, the chores are starting to pile up. I'm going to go clean up a bit."

“Master Kaito, I can deal with that later—and there’s the matter of the Governor’s invasion. It’s dangerous for you to be alone right now.”

“Nah, I’ll be fine on my own. Can you let me leave?”

“But—”

“...Hina.”

“...I understand. If anything happens, please call out at once. Although I’m protecting Lady Elisabeth, I won’t waste a moment in rushing to the side of my beloved.”

Although she didn’t seem convinced, Hina nodded. No doubt she’d seen Kaito’s pained expression and suspected that he’d wanted to be alone.

...Sorry about this. And thanks.

Thanking her internally, Kaito left the room. But while Hina’s conjecture had been right, it also missed the mark.

It’s true that I want to be alone, but... No, I need to be alone.

Kaito closed the door behind him and then took a short breath.

He looked down and then raised his head and strode forward with an expression brimming with resolve. After stopping by the kitchen and picking something up, he walked briskly down the stairs and made for the underground corridors.

The corridors were filled with the stench of rust and a noise that sounded like groaning, and they resembled a labyrinth.

If one entered them carelessly, they could easily get lost and die without ever finding an exit. But Kaito, taking advantage of the fact that his experiences in life had left him with the ability to remember any information that was accompanied by pain, had once carved a map of the important parts in his flesh. As a result, the pain had caused him to memorize the route he needed to take.

After entering the empty, unused room, Kaito closed its heavy door and locked it from inside. After surveying all the room’s stone walls and triple-checking that nobody was there, Kaito stuck his hand in his pocket.

From within, he drew out a clear stone wrapped in a handkerchief and a fruit knife.

“...Here goes nothing.”

As he muttered to himself, he opened his hand wide. Then he plunged the fruit knife deep into his flesh. Biting down on his lip a little, Kaito drew the blade horizontally across his palm.

The sound of flesh tearing rang out, and blood spilled forth onto the floor.

“That should be good, right?”

As he stared at his wound, which was gruesome enough to make any ordinary person balk, Kaito coolly gauged the pool of blood atop his hand.

After deciding that the quantity was sufficient, he took the stone from the handkerchief and placed it atop his palm.

The bottom of the stone sank into the mana-rich crimson pool. As it did, the blue rosebud within bloomed, as if it had just been watered, and the black feathers grew in quantity. However, no decisive change occurred.

...Was that not what I was supposed to do? No, wait, the kindling is in place. Now all it needs are live coals.

Kaito opened his mouth, unsure of what to say, and then closed it again.

Suddenly, he felt a chilly hand on his shoulder. Frantically, he looked to the side. However, nobody was there. Even so, the sensation on his shoulder remained.

In tune with the hallucination, a low, velvety, youthful male voice resonated in his ear.

“Now, you just have to whisper like this.”

“—La (become).”

Black feathers blew through the room like a blizzard.

The feathers, which should have only existed within the stone, piled up elegantly on the floor. Quietly mixed in with them were azure rose petals. As the shades of blue and black beat an erratic waltz, their movements became

more and more purposeful. The petals and feathers melted together and spun to create a thin cylinder.

Then the curtain dropped.

Like a magic trick, a man stood in its place.

Wearing his silk shirt, cravat, and black coat decorated with silver thread, he looked just like a titled aristocrat. His lustrous black hair and crimson eyes gave him a certain androgynous beauty, and he looked directly at Kaito. His fetching features bore an uncanny resemblance to Elisabeth's.

Having confirmed his hypothesis, Kaito spoke to the man.

"It's been a while, Vlad Le Fanu."

Vlad Le Fanu. The Kaiser's contractor.

Before she'd killed him, he'd been Elisabeth's most terrible foe. He smiled, a smile clearly full of heartfelt affection.



"You could say it's been a while, for a while it has been. You could also say it's nice to meet you, for nice to meet you it is. Now then, which would be better to greet you with? I'm at quite the loss... Hmm, if you were in my place, which would you pick?"

Vlad meaninglessly raised his index finger as he posed his question to Kaito. As always, his words and actions had a peculiar innocence to them. However, his voice sounded like he was speaking through a veil of water.



Upon further inspection, his body and clothes were partially see-through.

Just as I suspected... He doesn't have a physical form. But he still has his will.

Silently, Kaito reaffirmed that reality. Shrugging at his lack of response, Vlad looked around the room and snapped his fingers. Darkness and azure flower petals swirled around his feet. As Kaito wondered what he was summoning, a gorgeous seat made of beast bones and covered in animal pelts—and just as immaterial as Vlad—appeared.

With great pomp and circumstance, Vlad took a seat on the phantom chair.

"I'm well aware that you're not the kind of person who takes these things into account, I suppose. You really ought to invite your guests into rooms with chairs in them. Although even if you had, it's not as if I'd be able to use them in my current state, so it really is a rather presumptuous request of me to make. After all, I'm well aware of what the old 'me' did."

"...I don't know if I should refer to it as back when you were alive, but you have all those memories, right?"

"Indeed, that I do. I recall asking you to become my successor, and I recall you turning me down. I even recall being killed. Hmm? Now that I think about it, shouldn't I have chosen my opening remarks to be slightly more coldhearted? Oh, what a helpless softy I am."

Vlad began pondering to himself. As he took a tense breath, Kaito asked him a question.

"So you really know about it all, huh...? But you don't seem to be the same as the old you, the you from back when you were alive. What are you, then?"

"Well now, that's quite the problematic question! It's the height of folly, summoning something you don't even know the true nature of! ...Or rather, that's what I'd like to say, but you have some idea, don't you? Go on, say it. I'll let you know if you're right or wrong."

Vlad urged Kaito on by gesturing with his chin, arrogant yet amused. After staring at him for a moment, Kaito responded.

"If I'm right, then you're Vlad Le Fanu's soul—or rather, an inferior replica

thereof.”

“While it’s most irritating, being referred to as inferior, you’re quite correct! Would you look at that, a perfect score! The young man I set my sights on as a successor has grown rather impressively in quite a short time! Even though you rejected me, I’m oddly pleased in spite of that. Perhaps this is what they call parental love... In any case, what led you to that conclusion?”

“The heat I felt from your stone was a lot like my body—the kind of heat produced from a soul squirming around inside a homunculus. That was what first made me think that your stone had a soul sealed inside it as well.”

“I see, quite the impressive intuition you have. And?”

“And if you’d been able to get your actual soul to safety when you were on the verge of being killed, there’s no way you wouldn’t have been bragging about it and saying all sorts of annoying bullshit by now.”

Hearing Kaito’s incredibly impolite explanation, Vlad raised the corner of his mouth in annoyance. However, just as Kaito had expected, no rebuttal was forthcoming. He probably wasn’t able to make light of the facts.

In stark contrast to the way he’d liked to live his life, by no definition had Vlad’s death been elegant.

As Kaito played with the stone in his hand, he continued piling on conjecture.

“If that was the case, then that meant in some sense you were unrelated to the actual person who died... A perfect reproduction didn’t seem possible, but I felt like this world’s magic could probably produce something of that level.”

“Indeed, with an emphasis on finding a successor, the old me searched for ways to exert his influence on the world in posterity. While I can’t do much more than talk, I yet remain, so I can take part in the affairs of the world. Even if it’s not the same ‘me’ who died, it doesn’t change the fact that I’m carrying out actions—good heavens, what was I thinking? Well, as long as it’s entertaining, I suppose.”

Speaking as if it were somebody else’s problem, Vlad replied freely. Even though he’d been killed, it didn’t seem as though he planned to hold a grudge against Elisabeth or Kaito. As Kaito made that determination, the tension he’d

secretly been enduring unwound. Looking directly in Vlad's eyes, he asked him a question.

"Now then, there's something I want you to tell me. It's about the Grand King."

"Was Elisabeth defeated?"

Kaito swallowed. He had concluded that Vlad's knowledge of the outside world was limited to what the man himself had experienced up until death. He hadn't expected Vlad to have figured that out. As Kaito frowned, wondering if Vlad had been able to hear even when the stone was cut off from mana, a truly unpleasant smile floated to Vlad's face.

"Until just now, I had essentially no ability to perceive the outside world. That was but simple conjecture. After my death, that would have been the natural result of her running across the Grand King. The woman is far more vicious than I. As far as combat goes, her specialty lies not in her personal strength but the cruelty of her tactics—while she is inferior to me, she is stronger nonetheless."

Vlad readily acknowledged that fact. His eyes half-closed, he spoke as if waxing nostalgic about the past.

"Fiore and I were friends even before we made our demonic contracts. We would liven up balls together and transfix men and women alike. While we were quite close, however, our ideologies were at stark odds. I focused my efforts on what would come after we had taken control—prioritizing my bonds with my comrades, preparing a successor, and readying my army, although that army was annihilated after Elisabeth and I had our falling-out and I was captured—whereas Fiore paid no heed to such things and instead held the individual, that is to say herself, in sole regard."

"Yeah, I can believe that."

"She rejected my principles and refused to aid in rescuing me from the Church, but at least she took our long years of friendship into account and refrained from taking any selfish actions. But with my death, no doubt she's stopped holding herself back. Any lower-ranked demon whose brain she sticks her needles into will become her puppet."

Kaito narrowed his eyes. A brain-shaped needle had been stuck in the back of the Governor's neck.

"So that's what that needle was..."

"Once the needle's been placed, pulling it out will accomplish nothing. The only one immune to her needles is the Kaiser. She likely won't take control of those ranked close to her—the King, the Grand Monarch, and the Monarch—but most of the rest of the demons are probably already her pawns, their hearts free for her to wrench out as she pleases. And faced with her specialty, Sacrifice, even Elisabeth would be at a disadvantage."

As far as Kaito knew, the demons held a great deal of attachment to their own lives. Even though they mercilessly slaughtered others, they would balk at the thought of meeting the same fate. That was precisely why none of them had been able to use Sacrifice, as it would have required giving up their own heart. However, the Grand King, Fiore, was able to take advantage of it by using her comrades as scapegoats.

She could probably only use it as many times as there were demons remaining.

...Dammit.

Kaito bit down on his lip. Vlad, taking pleasure in seeing his pained expression, continued.

"And? Is that all you wished to ask me? As far as Fiore is concerned, that's the sum total of the useful information there is to know. May I take my leave now? Not that I would mind wiling away time making idle banter, mind you..."

"I have...one request."

"Ah, music to my ears. Ask away."

A wicked smile crossed Vlad's face. Kaito clenched his fist.

As he was then, Vlad wasn't contracted with the Kaiser. But even on his own, *demonic* was a perfectly apt descriptor for him. Vlad Le Fanu was a man who constantly probed at the weaknesses in people's hearts.

Knowing just how foolish it was to ask a favor of such a man, Kaito raised his

voice.

“Could you teach me how to use magic?”

“...Oh?”

Vlad frowned in surprise and then leaned back in his beast-rib chair and crossed his hands.

“That wasn’t what I was expecting at all. I had been quite certain that you would ask me how to go about freeing Elisabeth from Sacrifice’s influence.”

“When Elisabeth wakes up, I’m gonna follow her lead as far as dispelling Sacrifice goes. If I asked you, there’s a fair shot that you’d teach me a method that would end up killing her.”

“How rude. I would never tell you such a lie.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“It’s true! How could I bear using your filthy hands to kill my dear Elisabeth? As I no longer have hands to crush her slender throat myself, I wish merely for her to keep living so that she may continue suffering. I wish for her to suffer foolishly, helplessly, and endlessly, until eventually she meets the same fiery end as I.”

“You’ve got some fucked-up tastes.”

Vlad ran his tongue across his lips as Kaito derided him and then shrugged lightly.

“While it feels odd to come out and admit it, people with healthy tastes generally don’t form contracts with demons. Their very existences are wicked and twisted... But in any case, why seek instruction from me? Wouldn’t you be better off simply having Elisabeth teach you?”

“When we faced off against the Grand King, I was just baggage. I need to get stronger and fast. And one other thing...”

“One other thing?”

“I can’t rely on Elisabeth.”

“Oh?”

Vlad opened his eyes wide in an abrupt show of glee. Kaito met his crimson gaze.

Ever since he'd arrived in this world, all his experiences had taught him one thing.

The Torture Princess was a terrible sinner and a cruel woman. And if the need arose, she could even be merciless to those who'd earned her trust. If Kaito asked, she'd probably have been willing to use her torturous means to train him in the ways of magic. However, she'd probably choose the specifics of her methods herself.

And while she could be callous toward Kaito, she wasn't a monster.

And that means...she probably won't push me hard enough for me to become truly useful.

Dark magic was accompanied by pain, and the power of demons demanded it.

Lastly, Kaito's body was accustomed to pain.

When he'd put those three truths together, Kaito had realized the key implication therein.

And to check if he was right or not, he needed Vlad's help.

Vlad was a man who had once trained Marianne, an ordinary tutor—and a woman Kaito himself had killed—into a necromancer. No doubt he would gleefully cast open doors that Elisabeth wouldn't have dared touch.

The reason Kaito had hidden Vlad's soul from Elisabeth was to obtain information and knowledge. It would have been too much of a waste to simply throw away access to the memories of the Kaiser's contractor. But if not for the current situation, Kaito wouldn't have had any intention of actually summoning Vlad.

Rational as he was, though, Kaito could be rash and cruel when it came to matters involving himself. As long as he didn't fall into madness like Marianne had and all he did was receive education, the only person this decision would affect was him.

After making that judgment, Kaito continued making his request.

“I won’t let you do to me what you did to Marianne. But you asked me to become your successor, so you must know some way that I can make full use of myself, some way that Elisabeth doesn’t.”

“Oh, that I do indeed.”

A beastly grin crossed Vlad’s face. However, he wiped it away a second later.

Then he spoke in a calm, gentlemanly tone.

“I see the makings of one who can surpass Elisabeth in you, after all. You understand pain, and you can regard wounds with a calculating eye. But in spite of that, you act strongly when driven by hatred, and you possess a fastidious side as well. You’re a person with great capacity for malicious growth. However, it seems that you reject the notion of taking from others. That will make it difficult for you to develop, but...you did come out of your way to ask me for help. First of all, there’s one thing you’re suited toward that I can teach you right now.”

As Vlad spoke gently, he opened both his hands. He was clearly plotting something.

Even though he realized that, Kaito nodded. The disparaging remark the Grand King had thrust at him still rang in his ears.

“And as for you, lover boy, do try to get a bit stronger.”

She was totally right. I need to become stronger—I need to prepare for the worst, going forward. At this rate, I’m going to lose all the things that I worked so hard to obtain.

Kaito thought back to all the sadistic things the Grand King had done and said. She clearly numbered among those who took things from others. Even compared to the other demons, whose very lives she took advantage of, Fiore was in a league of her own.

At the rate things were going, Kaito was going to remain a member of the oppressed and have everything taken from him.

That was something he refused to let happen. But in order to surpass the

trials before him, the only chip Kaito had to gamble with was himself. He slid it forward; however, he didn't take his hand off the chip just yet.

Sensing his caution, Vlad continued talking in his coaxing voice.

“The fact you were able to summon me means that you learned how to activate magical devices, correct? The next lesson is the practical test. Carve a deep wound in your flesh and then, using the pain as your anchor, gather the mana flowing through your blood. Once you’ve gotten used to gathering it, try to merge its heat and your pain within your body. Then, when you can clearly feel the mana atop your palm, use your voice to set it off. That should allow you to give it form.”

Kaito looked down at his bloody palm, which still clasped the stone. After passing the stone to his other hand, he began gathering mana around the pain of his wound. The wound gradually grew hot.

As he felt the heat and the pain mix together, it reminded him of the injuries he'd grown so used to in life, and he felt a faint weight atop his hand. However, it still didn't have a form.

Kaito envisioned the closest thing he could to the heat—fire.

“—La (become).”

As he whispered, a golden flame rose into the air. It quickly vanished, but Vlad clapped his hands.

“Brilliant. For a beginner such as yourself, it's quite rare to become so proficient with pain so quickly! Unfortunately, though, the magic that technique will allow you to use is limited. Generally, turning the pain of others directly into mana is by far the most efficient method. To that end, you'd need to consume the flesh of a demon...”

At that point, Vlad licked his lips again. Then he whispered, his voice dripping with the cloying sweetness of honey.

“...or summon a demon yourself.”

“Master Kaitooooo! Where are youuuuu?!”

Suddenly, Hina's voice rang out. As it did, Vlad's body began crumbling.

Apparently, he planned to beat a retreat of his own volition before they could be discovered. How gracious of him.

From the tips of his toes, his body transformed into black feathers and azure flower petals. The phantasmal petals and feathers swirled as they were sucked back into the stone.

“Master Kaitoooo!”

Kaito could just make out Hina’s voice from a distance. Before long, she’d end up making her way into the underground corridors in her search. Kaito was at a loss for what to do.

It’d probably be better for me to go out on my own. But I don’t think there’s any way I’m going to be able to hide this wound on my hand.

After pondering his options for a moment, he shoved the bare stone into his pocket and set the fruit knife on the floor. Then he roughly wrapped the handkerchief around his hand and tied it off tightly with his teeth.

“Master Kaitooo, where are youuuu?!”

“I’m coming!”

After surveying the room one last time, as if looking for Vlad, Kaito took off at a dash.

Behind him, all that was left was a fresh bloodstain.



“Master Kaito, thank goodness, I was so worr— What happened to your haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaand?!”

“Huh? What?”

Even though he’d wrapped it up with the handkerchief and hidden it behind his back, there had been no hiding his injury from Hina’s sharp eyes. Right after they’d found each other in the first-story hallway, she’d let out a scream, circled around Kaito, and grabbed his hand.

The handkerchief wrapped around it was already stained red, and blood was dripping off it.

Wondering what excuse to give, Kaito unconsciously looked up at the ceiling. But Hina didn't ask.

...What? She's...not going to ask how I got hurt?

Hina stared silently at the blood-soaked handkerchief. Then, as Kaito was thinking, a torrent of tears came pouring from the corners of her emerald-green gemstone eyes.

“Wh—? Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, Hina, why are you crying?”

“Lady Elisabeth is wounded, and while I wasn't watching, my beloved Master Kaito has been injured as well... My artificial tears won't stop coming... My pardons, my sincerest pardons. Even though you instructed as such, this happened because I wasn't able to be with you... Even though I am your lover and your shield, I—”

“No, no, this isn't your fault! I mean, hey, my hand just slipped when I was cleaning up the knives... Even if you'd been there for me, I was just being clumsy, so please don't apologize! I'm the one at fault here!”

“No, Master Kaito, that isn't the case. If I'd been there, I would have immediately taken your hand in mine and stopped the bleeding and then snapped that violent bastard of a knife in two... Wahhhh!”

“Hina, the knife didn't do anything wrong.”

Kaito was lost as to how to convince Hina not to assign blame to inanimate objects. While he thought, Hina stroked his hand over and over while being careful to avoid his wound.

Her tender, sorrowful gesture filled Kaito with guilt. As he was about to open his mouth to speak, Hina's expression suddenly changed.

“That's right! I mustn't just stay here like this! We have to treat your hand! All the medical equipment is in Elisabeth's room, so we should head—that's right! Before that, there's something I must tell you!”

“Something you have to tell me?”

“Lady Elisabeth has opened her eyes!”

The instant he heard her say that, Kaito took off at a run.

“Oh, Master Kaito! Please wait for me!”

As he ran, ignoring the voice calling out for him to stop, he passed through a hallway decorated with imposing stone statues as he pulled ahead of Hina. He dug his feet into the ground atop the unpleasant designs cast by the stained-glass clerestory windows as he rounded a corner.

He continued dashing straight down the hallway and then vigorously cast open the door to the bedroom.

“Elisabeth, are you okay?!”

“...Hmm?”

Elisabeth was sitting on the bed, stark naked.

Their gazes met, then parted. After an awkward silence, the two clumsily voiced their confusion.

“.....Huh?”

“.....Hmm?”

Kaito looked once more at the scene before him, unsure of what to say. Elisabeth’s pale limbs, each like a piece of art without a single wasted stroke, were adorned with captivating crimson runes. Her slender, crossed legs cast a precarious shadow between them, her waist was so thin it seemed to invite an embrace, and the curves of her breasts were shapely.

After looking over Elisabeth’s tender, beautiful body from top to bottom, Kaito opened his mouth and spoke mechanically.

“I’m very sorry.”

“I’ll have your head.”

Kaito slammed the door shut with all his might. As he wiped away his cold sweat, he took a deep breath. Hina, who’d been chasing after him, stared him straight in the eyes and lifted a hand.

She then loudly slapped Kaito across the forehead.

“Ow.”

“You mustn’t enter a lady’s bedroom without so much as calling out first,

Master Kaito. Bad boy, sir.”

“Yeah, that...that was my bad.”

“Please wait here for a moment. Lady Elisabeth, pardon me, I’m coming in.”

Hina opened the door a hair and then slid inside. When she came out, she was holding medicine and bandages.

She lathered a magical dark-green poultice—apparently of Elisabeth’s make—on Kaito’s wound and then wrapped it in a bandage. Although it worked more slowly than a healing spell, it was supposed to close up wounds without the need for stitches.

At about the time Hina was finishing up Kaito’s treatment, a voice called out from inside the room.

“’Tis fine now; my analysis is finished. Enter.”

“As soon as I open the door, are you going to torture me?”

“Ha. Any other day, I’d sit you atop the Ducking Stool, but at the moment I haven’t the mana to spare. Be grateful for my poor condition.”

“Man, I’m not gonna be glad about something like that. I’d rather just get dunked underwater.”

“...True, I misspoke. If a demon came to attack, we would find ourselves in quite the pinch. ’Tis a nasty situation.”

As he listened to her quiet voice, Kaito opened the door.

Just like before, Elisabeth was sitting atop the bed. However, she was no longer naked, instead wearing her usual bondage dress. The crimson runes were still visible upon the exposed sections of her skin. Elisabeth was in better shape than he’d expected, though, and she was gently tracing the runes on her shoulder with her finger.

“To put it simply, these runes inhibit the mana running through my body. They act much like blood clots. Because of their obstruction, I cannot use my mana as freely as I’d wish.”

“They hold it back? Your mana’s not gone?”

“Indeed, nothing has been taken from me. If such a thing happened, I would cease being able to preserve the roots of demonic flesh running through my body, after all. I slaughtered my people until their corpses piled up, and doing so afforded me just enough power to maintain my body even without constantly harnessing the pain of others. If that was impaired, I’d not last long.”

Elisabeth raised her arm out in front of her and then grabbed her elbow, her fingers sporting painted black fingernails. The crimson runes pulsated almost like veins.

“My magical energy is silent, like how water that is too clear can appear as if it is nothing at all. However, as I slept, my blood fought against the runes, and most of my mana flows once more... At the moment, I can summon torture devices, but their power is reduced. It’s really quite annoying.”

Elisabeth clicked her tongue. As she did, Kaito thought back to what Vlad had just told him. The Grand King could only use Sacrifice as many times as there were demons remaining.

What exactly would happen if Elisabeth was on the receiving end multiple times over?

“Is there any way to cure it?”

“Both yes and no, in a sense.”

Elisabeth scrunched up her face in annoyance. Biting down lightly on one of her fingernails, she revealed the sole method.

“The only way to remove Sacrifice is to infuse my body with blood that has more powerful magical energy than my own. That would wash away the spell.”

“Blood with more powerful magical energy than yours?”

“Aye, indeed. More powerful than mine, the blood of a grand sorcerer and peerless sinner. Vlad would have qualified, but his body has already turned to ash... As far as other mages who can boast power surpassing mine, the Grand King is likely the only one. I’ve little choice but to defeat her and use her blood.”

Kaito’s eyes widened. They’d wanted to dispel Sacrifice before they had to fight the Grand King. But in order to do that, they needed blood with stronger

magical energy than Elisabeth's—and that meant they needed the Grand King's blood.

I'm having a real hard time envisioning us pulling that one off. Is there really nobody else whose blood would qualify?

He bit his lip. Elisabeth no doubt understood just how problematic the method was. Her expression was grave. But she shook her head and then stood up.

"Tis little use sitting around and coming up with bleak predictions all day. We make for the throne room, Kaito."

"The throne room? Why?"

"Because it has a convenient hole in it."

Kaito tilted his head at her declaration. The cloth extending out below her waist fluttering, Elisabeth set off.

Her heels clicking loudly as she walked, she spoke decisively.

"Tis time to train in the ways of magic, Kaito. The fighting will likely only get fiercer from here. Hina is what she is, but she won't always be able to reach you in time—if you remain as weak as you are, you're liable to die."

Hearing her harsh assessment, Kaito nodded. From here on out, he was going to need to be able to protect himself.

Also, although Elisabeth likely didn't intend for him to take matters that far, Kaito wanted to become even stronger than that, if possible.

The weak get stolen from.

While he didn't intend to become a pillager himself, he was going to be forced to fight.

Sometimes, protecting the peace carried a price. He'd known that since long ago.



An arrow of flame flew through the air, an arrow of ice pierced the ground, and a hammer of lightning smashed into a tree.

While the flame had been the most impressive, all three had gone without a hitch.

“Did...did I do it?”

His breath ragged, Kaito wiped away the sweat beading up on his forehead. As he did, blood smeared across it from his freshly reopened wound. He felt dizzy, almost anemic. That was likely because he'd expended the mana in his blood. While it would replenish given time, the sensation was none too pleasant.

The area surrounding the desolate hill the castle sat upon was blanketed by a thick forest.

One section of it was stained a bloody black from when the Knight's beast had been skewered. Other than that, though, the rest of the forest was serene, save for the newly scorched tips of some of the taller trees.

Kaito's magic had a good deal of force behind it. He'd felt a proper weight in his hands, and he turned to Elisabeth—who was sitting atop a new throne brought from the Treasury—with an expression steeped in anticipation.

“How...how was that?”

“Perfect—”

Her response was clear and concise. Kaito's expression loosened at her praise. However, she quickly cut off the congratulatory words as they left her mouth. For some reason, she bore a thoroughly displeased expression.

“Elisabeth, your face...you're scaring me here. Was there some sort of problem?”

Kaito posed his question timidly. As she placed her elbows on her armrests and her cheeks in her hands, Elisabeth glared back at him.

“There were none, which is precisely the problem. Now, Kaito...where exactly did you get that wound on your hand?”

“Wh-what, this...? I just cut my hand a little when I was cleaning up the knives.”

“'Tis rather deep, for a 'little' cut...and a rather convenient one, at that. All it

takes to become able to use magic is a small trigger, but even so, you're too proficient... I find it hard to believe this is your first time."

As Kaito listened to her speak, he felt himself break out into a cold sweat. The prospect of trying to deceive her and having it going poorly was terrifying. He elected to remain silent. Elisabeth licked her lips, as if troubled by something.

"Why might that be? True, your familiarity with pain dwarfs that of most others...meaning the most difficult-to-lay groundwork was already in place, but... Kaito."

A bead of sweat ran down Kaito's chin.

The next moment, a high-pitched noise like something scraping against glass rang out.

Everyone there jumped when they heard the screech. Something white was soaring over the treetops and letting out a grating whine as it flew toward the throne room. Upon further inspection, it was a milky-white orb, remaining airborne by rapidly flapping its wings.

Whatever it was, it wasn't any sort of respectable life-form.

Immediately, Hina leaped off. The hem of her apron dress fluttered as she held her halberd aloft. As she did, Elisabeth called out to stop her.

"Hina, halt! That thing is a device containing urgent communications from the Church!"

Hina, lowering her weapon, fell straight down and landed.

The orb stopped in front of Elisabeth. Then its wings fell out, it returned to being an ordinary jewel, and it plopped into Elisabeth's palm. Throngs of runes whizzed across its surface.

Elisabeth, having deciphered the torrent of glowing magical runes, opened her eyes wide.

"Demons are attacking a port town to the south? The Grand Earl and the Grand Duke have joined forces?"

"What?"

Kaito let out a surprised exclamation. As he understood it, ever since the Torture Princess and the Kaiser had their falling-out and struck each other down, the demons had avoided conducting large-scale attacks and instead preferred to amass power individually. Furthermore, after Vlad, their mediator, had been captured, none of the demons had worked together with one another.

Yet, after all this time, two demons were coordinating and attacking a human town.

Narrowing her emerald eyes, Hina spoke in a strained voice.

“This is clearly the work of the Grand King... Is it not, Lady Elisabeth?”

“To be sure. Either that wench revealed my weakened state to them or is controlling them both directly...but in either case, we’ve no choice but to go. The Church has given me direct orders to subjugate them.”

“Wait, what? No! What are you talking about?!” Kaito shouted.

Seeing the anger in his face, Hina closed her half-open mouth and took a step backward.

Kaito glared hard at Elisabeth. Until just a moment ago, she’d been stuck sick in bed. Even though her condition was somewhat better, she was a long way off from being fully recovered. Regardless, though, she rose from her throne.

“Have you forgotten, Kaito? Should I defy the Church’s orders, I’ll meet my death at the stake.”

“Even so, they can’t just expect you to run at full throttle twenty-four seven! We can contact the Church and tell them—”

“What are you, a dunce? They’d not excuse me over a matter as trifling as that. The Church cares little for my condition. Their God sits idle, saving no one. In the name of that God, they brandish their whips at their restrained hounds and, in doing so, make the world go round. In the name of their God, all is well.”

“Well, that’s screwed up! You know, I’ve been thinking this for a while, but now I’m gonna come out and say it.”

Kaito’s breathing was ragged. Due to his fierce anger, his mind was conversely

starting to clear up. As he calmly put his thoughts in order, he gave voice to the sense of discomfort that had been growing within him for some time.

“You’re eventually gonna get executed. After you kill the fourteen demons, they’re gonna kill you at the stake. That’s your obligation, and that’s your atonement. But even so, your sins won’t be forgiven. And sorry, but I agree. You’ve left too many corpses in your wake.”

“I have no rebuttal; everything you say is as it is. But what of it?”

“But it’s messed up that you’re the only one fighting.”

“...”

Elisabeth elected to remain silent. Kaito took that as affirmation.

She herself should have noticed just how unreasonable it was. Between the demons’ countless tragic victims and him having watched their battles, Kaito, for one, had had doubts and frustration pile up inside him.

“I get that other people can’t match up against demons. After having left so many corpses in your wake in order to gain power, you’re the only one who can face off against them. But why is nobody else shedding their blood? Why aren’t they laying down their lives to protect others? How can they leave all the fighting to someone who knows they’re going to be killed—how can they keep their own hands clean while they leave cleaning up the swine to the sow? That’s fucked up! How can they get away with that shit?!”

“Kaito.”

“How can they just sit up in their box seats? It’s one thing when things are normal, but when you’re as weak as you are now—”

“Mind your tongue.”

Her voice, sharp as a knife, stopped Kaito in his tracks. Feeling as though he’d just been stabbed in the throat, he closed his mouth. But overpowered and silenced as he was, he still glared at Elisabeth. On the receiving end of his gaze, she wore a cold—yet somehow gentle—expression.

“I am the Torture Princess, Elisabeth Le Fanu. I have tortured and killed more than any other, been captured by the Church, and been tasked with slaying

fourteen demons. And once I've executed them all, I myself will be put to the stake. I have harmed, oppressed, and killed mercilessly, brutally, and arrogantly. And now the feast and feaster have switched places. Mankind has the right to use me up and slay me as they please. That is what I decided."

The Torture Princess, a woman who had tyrannized and stolen from many, spoke with a serenity that evoked the image of a martyr. Her crimson gaze pierced through Kaito. She had the eyes of a solitary wolf.

The peerless sinner, prouder than any other, pressed on.

"I, and none other, decided that. And I shan't let any criticize that decision. Not a soul."

No matter what he said, he wouldn't be able to budge that resolve of hers.

As he realized that, Kaito swallowed the rest of what he wanted to say. After all, he understood that he, too, was constantly protected by the Torture Princess. He was in no position to casually judge others.

Yeah, I get it. I'm just a dim-witted servant—I don't have the qualifications to get mad about that.

As Kaito involuntarily turned his face away, Elisabeth began walking. Her lustrous black hair fluttered behind her as her heels clicked sharply on the stone floor.

"We head for the town in question. Hina, Kaito, come—but be prepared to defend yourselves."

Kaito nodded in ready assent and then tightly squeezed his blood-drenched hand.

Then he tried to follow after Elisabeth.

Suddenly, he felt a tug on his elbow.

"Huh?"

Kaito turned to check behind him, and he saw Hina standing there. She was looking directly at him with her beautiful, transparent emerald eyes.

Right before he could ask her what was going on, she placed her halberd on

the floor and abruptly extended her arms.

“Pardon me, Master Kaito.”

“Hina, what are—?”

Then she pressed down on his cheeks.

As she sandwiched his face between her hands, Hina wore a serious expression. Although her hands were those of a doll, they were just as warm as a human’s.

After a short silence, a question mark appeared over Kaito’s head.

“Hina, whuff thiff all of a fuffen?”

“Have you settled down, Master Kaito? If you have, I have something I would like to say.”

Hina took a deep breath.

Her eyes filled with worry and unease, she spoke eloquently and in a single breath.

“The wound on your hand is not something you could have gotten by putting away knives. You are hiding something—and furthermore, it appears to be something that you cannot tell myself or Lady Elisabeth about.”

“...”

“I have no intentions of defying your wishes and attempting to pry information out of you. But there is one thing I ask that you please remember. No matter what secret you may harbor, I will always be on your side. So no matter what happens, please do not hesitate to call on me. Do you understand?”

It was like she was trying to etch her thoughts in Kaito’s mind. The words shook him.

Hearing her concern brought him nothing but happiness. During his life, not a single person had ever shown Kaito kindness or goodwill. And nobody, not even his parents, had once tried to protect him. But regardless of what he was hiding from her, Hina was telling him that she would defend him.

Even so, he couldn't reveal his secret to her.

If I told her, there's no doubt that she and Vlad would go for each other's throats.

Keeping her in the dark was painful, but he didn't have any other options.

As he remained silent, Hina loosened her grip on his face. Her expression seemed somewhat forlorn. Seeing that, Kaito opened his newly freed mouth and, as if to pile on to what she'd just said, suddenly brought up something he needed to tell her.

"Hey, Hina...why do you go so far to protect me?"

"Because I love you."

"Yeah, I get that. You told me, right? That you may have the preconfigured heart of an automaton, but it's still yours and yours alone. That the moment you chose me as your master, and I chose you, that you decided to dedicate your love to me and none other... That made me really happy."

"Master Kaito... Of all the things that have happened to me in this world, meeting you was the most... If not for that, none of the other good things would have happened. It was my sole moment of fortune and my supreme joy."

"But why me?"

"...Master Kaito?"

"I don't have anything to offer you. I'm just an ordinary human. I can't understand why you picked me. I don't have nearly that much value, which means that... Or rather, even if that wasn't the case, even if I did have value, I can't let you get dragged down by how weak I am."

Hina was about to open her mouth but then closed it. She prompted Kaito to continue. He nodded deeply.

"From here on out, even more so than before, I could die at any moment. So I'll say it one more time. Even if I die, I want you to keep on living. That alone I refuse to give up on."

Kaito made his declaration. She'd offered out her hand to him and told him to rely on her, but he couldn't take it.

Hina inhaled deeply and then exhaled and pursed her lips tight.

She then put a great deal of force into her hands. Kaito's cheeks were squished even flatter than before.

"Ahain, why are you squiffing my sheekf?"

"First of all, as to why I chose you... It would take an entire week to go over everything, is that all right?"

"Why?"

Kaito blinked, having not expected her response. Hina fixed her gaze on him, her eyes overflowing with warmth and affection. She smiled as if looking at someone incorrigible.

"In time, I will explain why I chose you. Why it couldn't possibly have been anybody else. However, at the moment, we don't have the time. We must go together to where Elisabeth is."

"...! Hina, about what I just said, I need your response."

"I understand perfectly. These peaceful days that you hold so dear, that we all love, are on the verge of falling apart...and you're afraid. But don't worry, Master Kaito. You needn't make such assumptions."

Hina kneaded Kaito's cheeks. As she pulled them horizontally, she smiled.



“It is in predicaments such as these that it’s most important to smile. It’s going to be okay. I will absolutely protect the both of you. Even if you say you don’t want me to, I will stand in the way of all your enemies. And I will protect everything you have. Please believe in me. You have no need to speak of such sad things, for that day shall never come—not for all eternity.”

Hina laughed, as if to reinforce her point. She let go of Kaito’s cheeks, bowed deeply, and then raised her head.

She bore the fierce, resolved eyes of one whose heart was firmly set.

“I won’t allow it. No matter what.”

She picked up her halberd and ran off, her silver thread hair glimmering as she went. Kaito, now alone, looked down at his hands in a daze.

As he was now, would his eyes ever look like that?

He calmly raised his hands and then clapped his face.

“...Let’s go.”

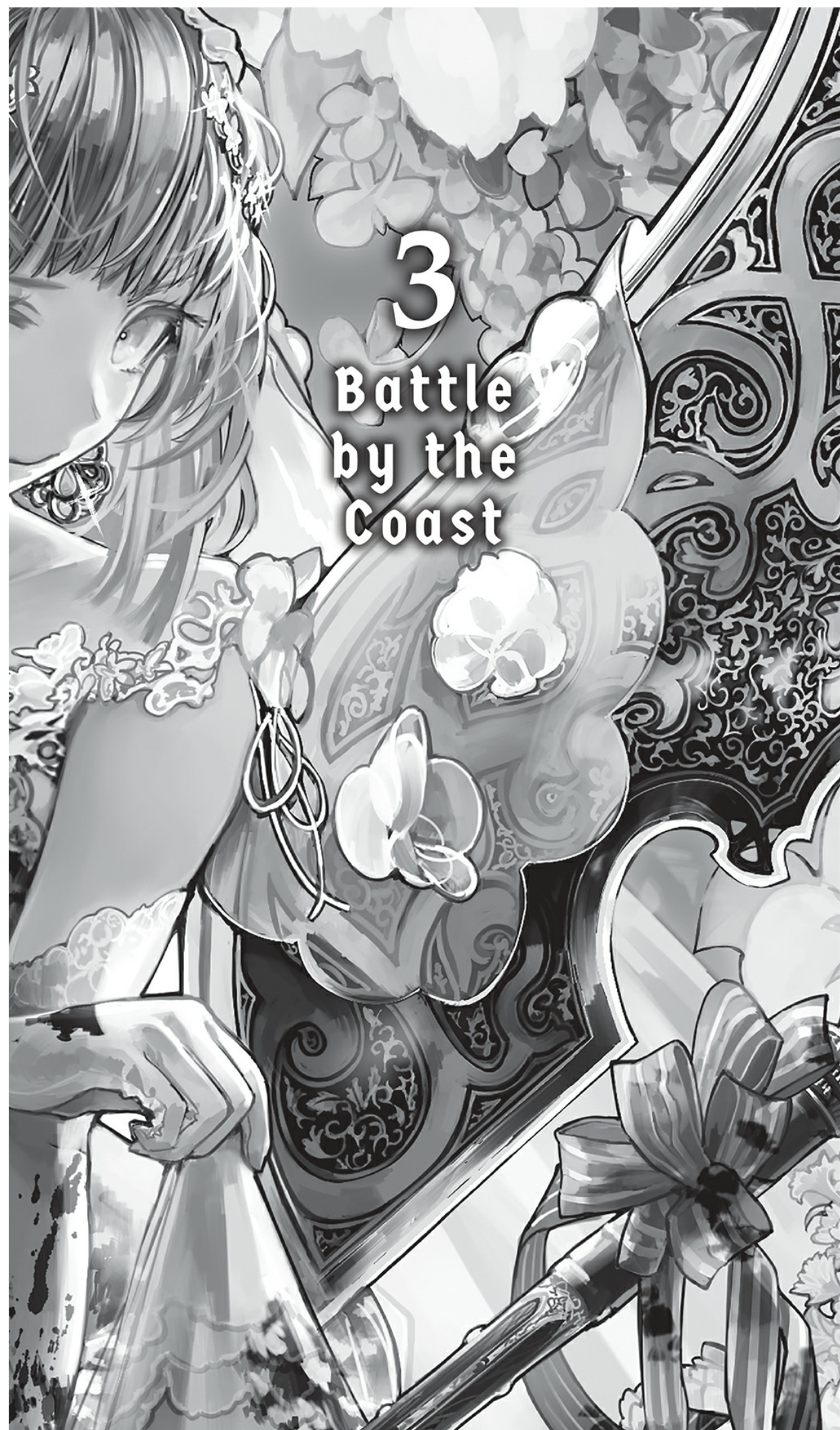
The warmth from Hina’s hands still lingered on his face, and the stone containing Vlad’s soul still sparkled within his pocket.

He didn’t know what was right anymore.

All he could do at the moment was struggle desperately against the situation before him.

He had to believe that terrible day would never come.

Even if that was nothing more than a lie.



F r e a m d T o r l o r c h e n

3

Battle by the Coast

The salty sea breeze mingled with the scent of something rotten.

The town, built within an inlet, spread out like a fan with its back to the mountains. Its plaster walls erected to keep out the sea breeze and roof tiles made of unglazed clay cast the town in magnificent shades of orange and white.

As one got farther from the coastline and approached the mountains, the townscape followed a natural incline and increased in altitude. At the peak of its hundreds of small sets of dogleg stairs, a branch office of the Church had once overlooked the glittering blue sea and all its splendor. However, the building, which was adorned with a statue of an upside-down saint shedding tears of blood, was now tragically flattened beneath a massive flower.

Meaty, tonguelike petals dripping with mucus protruded from the flower. At the ends of its thorny stem, disturbing, flesh-colored roots resembling human genitals extended outward. The roots crept through the town, crushing buildings as they wrapped around everything in their path. Countless corpses were strewn across the streets and atop the stairs. Strangely, all their abdomens were crushed, like so many deflated leather bags. Men and women alike had the aftereffects of prolonged anguish etched onto their faces.

They had been run through by plant roots and had their organs forcefully sucked out.

“This is...horrifying...”

As he whispered in horror, Kaito traced the roots with his gaze. Right before they'd reached the sea, their growth had stopped.

The massive flower had been avoiding the sea, which was dyed red.

It, too, was contaminated.

The stained seawater was violently frothing. The beaches and wharves were covered in piles of dissolved seaweed and dead fish. Out at sea, the corpses of whales and dolphins with distended bellies were also visible.

Abandoned by their passengers, small boats belonging to the local elderly and large commercial ships alike were degrading at abnormal speeds. Their cargo had poured out of ruptured bilges and was floating among the corpses.

And in the middle of that terrible spectacle the vague outline of an enormous island had appeared.

Upon further inspection, it was pulsating.

The island was, in fact, a flesh-colored jellyfish large enough to be mistaken for land. It was as though the sea itself had developed a tumor that leaked pus and rot.

Both the flower and the jellyfish, made to grow without regards for their natural limits, were collapsing. They were too big to get a good view, so it was impossible to confirm whether or not they had needles stuck in the backs of their necks. However, it was clear to see that they had been unable to maintain their egos.

Using the magical runes they'd received from the Church, the three of them had teleported to the bottom of one of the staircases connecting the inlet to the mountains, as teleporting directly to the crushed Church branch office wasn't an option. From that vantage point, the series of disastrous scenes was right before their eyes.

Her black hair blowing in the sticky sea breeze, Elisabeth pressed down on her forehead.

"...Ah, what a headache. It seems both of them are being controlled. What a pitiful pair they are, yielding to her so readily. Of all the possible situations I foresaw, 'tis easily the worst of the lot."

"Are you all right, Lady Elisabeth?"

"Exasperation will do little to improve our lot, I suppose... The flower is the Grand Earl, and the jellyfish is the Grand Duke. We'll take them down starting with the weaker of the two and before they can spit out their hearts."

“Yes, ma’am.”

Bowing deeply, Hina adjusted her grip on her halberd. Kaito silently double-checked the corpses strewn throughout the town. As he did, he spotted a figure moving.

“...A survivor!”

His eyes wide with anticipation, Kaito quickly realized that he’d been off the mark.

It was a grotesque soldier, a servant of the demons, its head now transformed into a flower. The creature was trampling corpses and climbing over roots in search of something.

As Kaito wondered what it was looking for, the answer to that question became clear when a scream rang out from somewhere.

Although they’d been told that the Church had gathered up the survivors and used teleportation circles to evacuate them, apparently not everybody had made it out. The underling was tracking them down and mutely killing them.

Now that I think about it, that makes total sense. With the calamity falling on them so suddenly, of course they weren’t able to get everyone out that fast. Fuck!

Quietly clicking his tongue, Kaito called out to Elisabeth.

“Elisabeth, there are underlings loitering about. We gotta save the survivors.”

“The battlefield shan’t tolerate such naïveté. ’Tis best to overlook the victims—or so I’d like to say, but the Church would have my hide. ‘Do some good for the world,’ or so they tell me...but I haven’t the resources. Kaito, you deal with it.”

“Wait, me?”

“Worry not, I shall give you this.”

Elisabeth snapped her fingers. A sword with rubies spiraling around its blade dropped out of thin air. It was the magical tool they’d found in Vlad’s castle. Kaito hurriedly picked it up.

Kaito looked at the needle-thin sword with bewilderment. Unmoved by his reaction, Elisabeth continued speaking.

“You possess a golem body, a first-rate creation of my own making. Your control over magic surpassed my expectations, so you have a number of tools at your disposal. Fight. As far as I can tell, ’tis what you desire, yes?”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’ll do it... I can’t just sit back and watch you all the time.”

“Hina, your task is...very well. I’ll allow it. You may stay by Kaito’s side. The prospect of standing alongside one whose expression has surpassed unease and started to become as fierce as yours frightens me, so I’ll refrain from doing so.”

Glancing at Hina’s face as she spoke, Elisabeth heaved a sigh.

Hina, who’d looked so conflicted she seemed to be on the verge of stabbing either herself or Elisabeth, frantically wiped the anguish from her face. As she bowed to Elisabeth, she raised a question.

“Hearing those words fills me with gratitude. It is my greatest wish to stay by the side of my beloved and protect him... However, um, Lady Elisabeth, what shall you—?”

“Ha, don’t make light of the Torture Princess. My current power is more than sufficient to crush the Grand Duke like an ant.”

Elisabeth scoffed. Kaito and Hina, about to express their concern, held their tongues. The Torture Princess wasn’t bluffing. Her expression made that much clear.

Elisabeth wore a smile that was both ferocious and cruel.

“Now then, let us be off—they shall squeal like quartered swine and writhe like stuck caterpillars.”

Darkness and flower petals swirled, and Elisabeth took hold of the Executioner’s Sword of Frankenthal.

She then ascended the stairs with great leaps and bounds.

She reached a nearby root and jumped on top of it. She then broke into a gallant run toward the flower’s main body, remaining atop the root as she did. It was as though she was running atop her foe’s arm as a display of her power.

The root trembled as it rose into the air. Before it could come crashing down, though, Elisabeth yelled.

“Nail Gun!”

Darkness and crimson flower petals ran across the top of the root in a spiral. Then a thunking noise rang out in succession.

Rusted nails appeared out of the air and nailed the root into the road and buildings. It looked like they’d run through a set of human genitals.

Shuddering in pain, the flower began releasing foamy mucus from the bottom of its sepals. Kaito reflexively scowled. Mercilessly stepping on the nailheads, Elisabeth ran like an obsidian meteor.

Kaito stared at her, entranced. However, Hina called out to him, and he returned to his senses.

“Master Kaito, we must set out as well. Take care not to stray from my side.”

“Oh yeah, right. Let’s go.”

Nodding, Kaito broke into a run. The two of them ran up the stairs, making their way toward the direction they’d just heard the screams come from. The town, wrapped as it was in roots, felt like a ruin that hadn’t been inhabited in a millennium. The fact that signs of life could clearly be seen made the scene feel all the more eerie.

As they continued down the main road and passed a bay window filled with well-maintained houseplants, the two of them discovered an underling. The underling, who was wearing scaly armor made of leaves, slowly turned to look at them.

As it blinked its enlarged eyes, its last remnants of the human it had once been, Hina swung her halberd sharply.

“Hiyah!”

Her aim unerring, she chopped off its flowery head. However, even as it wobbled, it reached out for Hina.

Perhaps because it lacked a brain or a spinal cord, losing its head hadn’t proved fatal.

“Don’t get cheeky with me!”

With a sharp rebuke, Hina chopped off the arm reaching for her. Perhaps sensing the difference in their power, the underling reached out with its other arm and extended a thorny vine toward Kaito.

Hina immediately made to swing her halberd. However, Kaito stopped her with a look.

He then held his sword at the ready, as if to block the underling’s arm.

Calm down and act rationally. If I can’t deal with something of this level, I’ll never stop being baggage.

Right before the ivy could coil around his sword, Kaito focused his senses on the wound on his palm and then called out.

“*La* (burn)!”

A dazzling blaze burst forth. The magical flame spun in an ominous spiral, latching onto the ivy and devouring it. Its arm burning, the underling let out a cry of anguish.

Seeing the corpses littering the town had actually calmed Kaito down due to his intimate experiences in life involving hating and getting angry at horrible situations. However, his physical tension was another matter. Having seen that his magic worked, he breathed a sigh of relief. His trembling hand finally settled down.

That’s Elisabeth for you, always on the ball. The flaming weapon seems like it’ll be effective against these guys.

The underling ripped off its burning arm and began fleeing with an awkward gait. Kaito made to chase after it. Suddenly, though, it turned around, waving its arm around as its body burst into flames and it charged at Kaito.

“Gah!”

It looked as though Kaito was about to pay for his carelessness. A second later, however, a thunderous noise rang out and the underling went hurtling to the side. After blinking a few times, Kaito finally realized what had just happened.

Hina had mowed down the underling with the reverse side of her halberd, and it had gone flying and slammed into the wall of a building. The fire had largely gone out in the impact, but the underling was twitching and convulsing nevertheless. Merciless attacks were raining down upon it.

“Even! If! Master! Kaito! Himself! Desired! It! Know! That! Being! Beaten! To! Death! Is! A! Light! Punishment! For! Your! Rudeness!”

With the expression of an ogress, Hina shouted as she struck the underling between every word. Her attacks were focused on its chest, and its vegetal body was all but reduced to mincemeat. Her gaze was ice-cold, and after she’d confirmed its death, she gave a light nod.

“...And stay dead, filth.”

Her voice frigid, Hina turned back toward Kaito. When she did, her expression made a complete about-face. She exhaled reverently, a bright smile floating to her face as she sandwiched her halberd between her bountiful breasts and hugged herself tightly.

“Splendid work, Master Kaito! Given your skill, nobody would suspect that this is your first battle since you began learning magic! I would expect nothing less from my beloved! How lovable you are, how gallant, how cool, how I wish to hug you!”

“Th-thanks? Although I’m pretty sure you were the only one who did anything impressive there. Like, for real.”

“Oh my, no, that wasn’t the case at all. How humble you are. But even though these creatures are mere underlings, their resilience is nothing to scoff at... This trash is quite a handful. From here on out, I’d be better off crushing them than cutting them.”

Then they heard a scream. Kaito and Hina looked up with a start and then nodded to each other and ran off.

They ran by some residences and an area near the rock face to the west where the locals would sell fish from carts before reaching a group of buildings made from thick, sturdy walls.

A voice was audible from within an open door to the east.

“There!”

When he charged inside, Kaito witnessed Hell.

What would happen if you tied someone’s limbs together with barbed wire and then pulled on them until they reached their limit?

What would happen if you stuck tentacles into someone’s abdomen while they were still alive and then churned them around?

What would happen if you squeezed someone’s body until their bones broke and they vomited up all their organs?

Within that building, all those questions had been thoroughly answered.

The two underlings had dispassionately slaughtered the family, as if it was just another day on the job.

The remains of the grandfather, father, and mother were stuck to the tiled floor. It looked as though they’d been killed in that order. The room was fairly large, and alongside the wall, harpoons, fishing tackle, boats, and old nets were lined up on sturdy wooden racks. Among them, jars of colorful preserves and heavy-looking sacks were crammed together.

Apparently, this building was a storehouse. Based on the fact that it had no windows, the family within must have missed the Church’s evacuation order and been discovered by the underlings.

That had resulted in the dreadful spectacle before Kaito. However, there were yet survivors hiding among the jars of pickles.

The survivors were a pair of children. A young boy and girl with flushed cheeks were huddled together.

Having just finished crushing flesh, the underlings hadn’t noticed Kaito and Hina yet.

The underlings trampled over the remains of the mother—more specifically, her stomach, which was hanging out of her mouth like a fish pulled up from the deep sea—and reached for the children.

The young boy was in shock, and he stood motionless. His ankle was hanging out from the hiding spot, and ivy was about to wrap around it. Right before it

could, though, the boy's body was pulled into the space between a jar and a rack. The young girl was yanking on the boy's arm and trying to force him to move.

She was probably his older sister. She raised both her arms to try to conceal him and then glared at the underling. However, the brave front she put up soon vanished, like the flame of a candle. Her face scrunched up, and she let out an animalistic moan. Still, though, she never stopped defending the boy.

There was something in her eyes, something surpassing familial love and the resolve of a sister.

Suddenly, a particular memory flashed through Kaito's mind.

There was a time when a boy with red hair had sacrificed himself to shove Kaito out of harm's way. Muttering a small curse, that boy had a smile that looked like he was about to burst into tears before he was pulled away by the spider.

Then he was eaten alive.

Even though he hadn't wanted to die, the boy had wished for Kaito's happiness and instinctively protected him.

...Neue.

Ever since he'd survived that, not a day had gone by without Kaito recalling that name.

Before he noticed, he had pierced the underling through the back.

Kaito plunged the whole blade, along with the fragile-looking rubies that adorned it, deep into the underling. The underling, dumbfounded, turned around.

As their eyes met, Kaito grinned at it.

"La (burn to death)."

As he spat out the word, his mana burst forth. The sword burst into flames within the underling's body.

The underling let out an incomprehensible cry and lashed out. Then it turned

to charcoal from the inside out.

Kaito, not letting his guard down for a moment, released a second and third burst of flame before ripping his sword free. The remaining underling frantically extended ivy toward him.

Then *Hina landed behind it.*

“Hiyah!”

After receiving her two-legged kick, the underling crashed headfirst into a rack. A jarful of fish pickled in oil fell down and shattered. The rack swayed and then came collapsing down upon the underling.

Not missing her chance, Hina picked up her halberd and held it aloft. She wielded it like a meat tenderizer, bringing it down on top of the rack and striking the underling again and again and again.

With each loud, rhythmic strike, the rack grew flatter and flatter. A green, foul-smelling liquid spread out, mixing together with the oil and the vinegar.

As the smashed rack came as close to the ground as it would go, Hina stomped on it with one foot before softly snorting.

Kaito, too, kicked the carbonized underling in the stomach. Like a bad joke, it fell into pieces and crumbled to the floor. His anger momentarily abated, Kaito realized that he was trembling.

“Wh-what’s...happening to me?”

The underling was dead. There was nothing more to be afraid of. Kaito, trying to suppress his trembling with logic, knelt down on one knee. Trying desperately to feign composure, he called out to the dumbfounded girl.

“Are...are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere?”

“...Da...y...”

“Huh?”

A hollow voice leaked forth from the girl’s mouth, and Kaito responded carelessly. His prompting acting as a trigger, the girl suddenly opened her mouth.

Her throat rang a little as a heartfelt scream poured forth.

“Da...ddy... Mommy... Grampa... No, no, nonono, nooooooooooooooooooooo! N
oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!”

“Yeah...right... I’m sorry. We didn’t make it in time, did we?”

As if Kaito, too, was an enemy, the girl lashed out at him and continued screaming like a wounded animal.

Realizing that letting this go on would put her in danger—she might bite her tongue or go into convulsions—Kaito immediately stuck his hand in her mouth.

Her eyes widened as she bit down on his fingers.

“...!”

Hina was about to make a move, but Kaito reined her in with a glance. Kaito was all too familiar with the despair that accompanies events that can’t be undone; in his case, it had been his own untimely death. So he rubbed her back and patiently said the same thing again and again.

“Settle down; you’re okay. You’re gonna be okay, so I need you to settle down.”

Suddenly, the girl’s body went limp. However, it wasn’t because she’d calmed down. It seemed that her spirit had simply been wound too tight and had gone slack.

Even so, they didn’t need to be concerned about her going into a panic anymore. Kaito pulled his bloody, spit-covered fingers from her mouth, wiped them on his shirt, and then extended a hand to the young boy.

The boy’s eyes were dead, but he still reached back and squeezed Kaito’s wet hand. Kaito gave a short nod.

If he could still grab on to proffered hands, he was probably okay.

Picking up the girl and holding the boy’s hand, Kaito stood up. He closed his eyes and then shook his head.

“Yeah, there’s no other way... I’m sure I can manage. Definitely. It’ll be fine.”

Mumbling ambiguously as he thought, Kaito opened his eyes. Nodding once

more, he spoke in a voice full of determination, completely unlike the one he'd just used.

"Hina, I need you to take these two to the teleportation circle, the one to the castle, and then come back once you've made sure that they're safe."

"Wh...? You say that, but that will require a good deal of time! You'll be in danger!"

"I can't activate the circle on my own. They'll be in danger if we take them with while we fight or if we leave them here while we fight...and time's too precious for us both to take them. Please."

"...That certainly is a decision overflowing with mercy toward these siblings as well as the people of this town. However, to me, your safety is of the utmost—"

"My body is immortal. As long as I'm careful not to lose too much blood, my soul won't disappear. No matter how much I get hurt, I'll be able to survive. Please. I don't want to see anybody else die like Neue did."

Kaito bowed deep. Back when things were peaceful, he'd filled her in about Neue, little by little. He'd told her that the only reason he was still alive was because a boy had sacrificed himself to save him.

Hina sucked in her breath as though she'd been struck.

Kaito's sense of justice wasn't particularly on the strong side. He and self-sacrifice didn't belong in the same sentence. And he knew that he didn't have the strength to back up his words. However, even if he had to put himself in danger, there were some things he never wanted to see again.

He never wanted to watch someone sacrifice themselves like that again.

Yeah...that's right. I dunno how many more times I can take that.

And to that end, he had to do whatever he could. His face still pointing toward the ground, he made his request to Hina.

"Could you think of those kids' lives as my life for me?"

"Please, Master Kaito, raise your head. I've been being exceedingly rude."

Immediately, Hina dropped to one knee. Not having expected that response,

Kaito was flustered. As she did, she bowed even deeper before eloquently speaking.

“I failed to consider your resolve and, in doing so, caused you to lower your head... I have been indiscreet and oh so very rude. Later, I shall hand down the punishment for my irredeemable error myself. For now, I shall abide by your orders and momentarily withdraw. However...”

In a flash, Hina brought her head up. She looked directly at Kaito, his reflection cast in her emerald-green eyes. From within them peeked a sense of love and heartbreak and powerful anxiety and concern, like that of a woman leaving her husband alone on the battlefield.

“You asked me to think of these children’s lives as your own. However, I have long since thought of your life as my own.”

“Hina, I told you to stop saying that.”

“Indeed, but to me, it is the absolute truth. Master Kaito, it is precisely because we are in this situation that I tell you this. My place in life is by your side, my love, and should I lose you, then my life, too, would end. In following, if you deign to think of me, then please believe in me—and no matter what the situation may be, all you must do is tell me either to protect you or to fight together by your side.”

“Hina—”

“That is what it means to be companions. Please, if you must remember nothing else, remember that. While I shall now follow your orders and leave your side, I beg that you take care of yourself. All right now, you two, what good children you’ve been. Let us be off.”

Once she’d made her decision, Hina acted quickly. As gently and reliably as a mother, she scooped the two children up in her arms. She looked directly at Kaito, nodded at him, and then took off at a dash.

Taking off through the open door, she ran like the wind.

“...Trust her. Companions, huh?”

Murmuring quietly to himself, Kaito furrowed his brow as he thought.

However, he then quickly shook his head and turned to survey the storehouse. With their flesh torn, their innards scrambled, and their bodies squeezed, the corpses could barely be described as human anymore. They'd no doubt endured the pain for far too long.

After a few seconds of silence, Kaito bowed his head low.

"Thanks to you all holding out for so long, the two kids survived. I don't know much about families or parents, but the fact that you didn't use the kids as human shields... That's pretty amazing. At least, I think it is. Rest in peace...and know that the three of us are going to avenge you. Me, Hina, and most of all, the Torture Princess."

His eyes burned with silent rage as he spoke, and when he was finished, he left the storehouse.

He stopped for a moment and looked around. Dim light was shining down from the cloudy gray sky. The slick, unsettling roots glistened atop the buildings and the pavement. Littered around them here and there were the leather bag-like corpses.

As he gazed at the hellish spectacle, Kaito shook off his nervousness and began making his way back to the main road.

When he did, he heard a hoarse scream from the back of an alleyway.

Kaito looked closely at the space between the buildings. Then, to make sure the blood didn't stop flowing, he stuck his finger into the wound in his hand and reopened it. The blood flowed down the hilt of his sword and into his pocket. The stone quivered lightly from within.

He could feel a phantasmal hand on his shoulder. Vlad laughed, as if to mock him.

"My, my, my, quite the heavy role you've taken upon yourself. Now then, even if your foes are mere underlings, can a man as green as you survive? How do you wish to place your chips?"

"...I'm gonna make it. If I can't handle this much, then staying by Elisabeth's side till the end was never going to be possible. And I've got to consider what Hina said to me, too. I'm gonna stay alive, no matter what."

"I see. How gallantly tragic your resolve is and how wonderfully foolish. In that case, out of deference to your obstinance, I too shall place my bet on the side of your survival."

"Bet? You don't have squat to bet with."

"Your words cut like knives. It's rather difficult to entertain oneself with the body of a dead man, you know. I will have my fun, even if it's a mere matter of attitude—and I hate to lose. Do take care not to leave me unsatisfied."

With those threatening words, the phantasmal hand separated from Kaito's shoulder. Clicking his tongue, Kaito began running again.

He passed by the increasingly sparse buildings and made his way onto a path built into the side of the mountain. Unlike the brick surfaces that had been laid out for buildings—inns, public facilities, and the residences of the wealthy—the bare rock face here sported only a wooden pathway stuck onto it.

It appeared to be a hidden shortcut down to the inlet, which looked to be quite a way off.

Perhaps it was only designed to be used by the locals, as it didn't have any handrails. However, the wood looked sturdy, and the wide pathway seemed stable. Simply walking along it should have been safe enough. However, if one was carrying a baby in one arm and holding an ax in the other while inching backward, that was a different story altogether.

Atop the pathway, a bearded man was holding off a number of approaching underlings in that manner while letting out beastly shouts.

After confirming the count of the underlings attacking the man and the baby—numbering five in total—Kaito's eyes opened wide in rage.

You're kidding me! A flaming sword's not gonna be enough for me to deal with that many!

"Now then, what's the plan? Luck seems to be against you right from the onset. It would not be wholly reasonable to abandon them to their fate and flee, but... Hmm, if you did that, would that entail a deferment of our bet from earlier? While it would be fun to watch you die, it would also be a bit of a waste."

Vlad spoke, uninterested. Kaito, frozen in place, clicked his tongue as he racked his brain.

Even without using the sword, I know how to materialize fire. But as to whether or not I can muster enough firepower to reach the five of them... Yeah, I've got no confidence in that regard. And if my surprise attack fails, they'll gang up on me. What can I do that would be effective?

As he was thinking, the underlings were extending their ivy forward. The bearded man swung his ax even more frantically—as he'd apparently been doing up until then—and barely managed to repel the vines. However, he looked dangerously close to stepping off the path.

At this rate, more people were going to die. The negative emotions assailing Kaito's brain won out over the tension running through his body. As his rage reached its limit and straightened out his thoughts, he came upon an idea.

Then he screamed at the top of his lungs.

"Hey, assholes! Over here! Look this way!"

The underlings turned to look, as did the bearded man. Vlad's voice rang with exasperation.

"Well, well, well, what exactly do you think you're doing?"

"Shove it!"

The underlings, unsure of who to attack, stopped for a moment. Kaito, seizing that opportunity, banished Vlad from his thoughts and dove into their midst. He then took the ruby spiral's edge and pressed it against his throat. The jewels, magically stretched long and thin, were as sharp as razors.

Kaito then spun them once around his neck. Blood splashed in all directions, drenching the underlings.

Kaito imagined the pain in his throat transmitting to the blood and then shouted.

"La (burn)!"

The blood burst into flames. The underlings began burning up, and Vlad roared with amused laughter.

“I see, I see, so you had that method available to you! Absurd as it is to wound oneself, I see it was quite effective! You’re an even more forward-thinking fool than I expected!”

Annoyed, Kaito kicked one of the burning underlings in the flank and sent it tumbling down the side of the cliff.

The bearded man, suddenly understanding the situation, brought the back of his ax to bear on the underling closest to him. After watching to make sure it had properly fallen, Kaito turned his blade on an underling who wasn’t burning as bright as the others and ran it through.

Eventually, all that was left of the underlings were scorched corpses.

“Looks like...I pulled it off.”

As blood dripped down his neck, Kaito was overcome by dizziness and knelt on the spot. The bearded man frantically rushed over to him. As he adjusted his grip on the crying baby, he called out to Kaito.

“Hey, you! Are you okay?!”

“Yeah...I’m fine. My soul won’t vanish just from losing this much blood.”

“Can’t say I followed a word of that, but...you saved us! You saved my buddy’s daughter! I wasn’t able to protect her on my own. Thank you, son.”

The man roughly grabbed Kaito’s hand. But as he was about to shake it up and down, he stopped. He seemed to have noticed the deep cut on Kaito’s palm. The man eyes widened as he spoke.

“Son...you’re drenched in blood.”

Kaito didn’t hear him.

A violent, metallic noise like thunder rang out above their heads.

As if he’d been called, Kaito lifted his head and looked toward the top of the mountain. At the location where the Church brand office had once stood, hundreds of chains glittered as they burst forth.

At that moment, admiration and yearning shone in Kaito’s eyes.

As he spoke her name, his tone was like that of a child extolling a hero.

“...Elisabeth.”

The beautiful girl who brought judgment down upon demons was standing in front of the giant flower.

Rusted nails were piercing through the base of the flower, where its roots were the thickest. As she stood atop it, her dress fluttered in the wind.

Chains were wrapped around the body of the flower, encircling it again and again. The tongue in the center of the petals was being crushed by a sturdy iron wheel. The flower trembled, unable to spit out its heart.

From the back of its throat, it let out a bestial moan. The resulting wind pressure blew back Elisabeth’s hair. However, her expression showed no signs of changing. She whispered, her crimson eyes focused on the hideous flower.

“You tyrannized others, took from them, and killed them, and in the end, you had everything taken from you. Irony, is it not?”

“Elithabebebebeeeeeeeeeeeeth!”

“Worry not, Grand Earl. I, the Torture Princess, shall grant you a punishment and death befitting your life.”

Elisabeth held the Executioner’s Sword of Frankenthal before her face, like a knight.

Likely terrified by the premonition of inescapable death, the flower petals’ sepals writhed as they shot out seeds and saliva-like nectar. While most of them got flicked away by the chains, some of them were saved by their mucus and managed to slip out of the loop. The seed shells closed in on Elisabeth. However, before they could reach her, she leaped high into the air.

As she elegantly glided through the air, Elisabeth swung her sword, as if trying to rend the very sky.

“Pied Piper of Hamelin!”

Crimson flower petals and a vortex of darkness painted over the gray clouds. The sky turned an ominous color, the black and crimson joining at its center. Then something came from within, making a comical whizzing sound as it fell.

A round iron cage plopped down on top of the flower.

Rats began raining down around the cage.

Kaito, not having anticipated that ridiculous sight, instinctively tilted his head to the side.

“...Rats?”

The rats squeaked as they ran about. Some of them were eating the seeds that had fallen about, their eyes glittering with satisfaction. However, none of them were larger than normal, and they seemed rather harmless. Right as that thought went through Kaito’s mind, the sound of a loud pipe became audible.

He then saw Elisabeth sitting atop the cage and playing a transverse flute. From just looking at her closed eyes, serene expression, and elegant finger movements, she was the very image of a proper young lady.

Wait, she knows how to play that? ...And for that matter, where’d she pull that from?

As Kaito pondered those questions, the rats looked up in unison, their noses twitching. In tune with the jaunty rhythm, they squeaked and ran up the root in a line with their tails pointed straight up. Their destination was a small heart-shaped door on the side of the cage.

The rats energetically piled in. For some reason, they resembled a mob of children, scrambling to be the first ones into a domed theater.

As the last rat entered, the door closed. Slabs of metal clanged as they barred it and sealed the entrance.

“Now then, it’s showtime!”

Elisabeth spun her pipe in a circle. It transformed into the Executioner’s Sword of Frankenthal.

As she tapped the tip of her sword against the metal cage, a crimson flower garden spread across it. When she tapped the cage a second time, the flowers burst into flames, like candles on a cake.

Elisabeth then shrugged, stood up, and returned from the top of the cage to the head of the nail she’d been on previously.

At first, it was quiet. The flowers quietly continued to burn atop the cage.

However, before long, things inside the cage got noisy.

Kaito, finally realizing the comical method by which the torture worked, recoiled in horror.

The heat is circulating through the cage.

The rats, unable to bear the heat from above, began fleeing downward.

They bit and chewed their way through the petals and into the flower.

And the entire flower was made out of the Grand Earl's flesh.

A scream rang out. The rats gnawed their way farther into the flower. Their tiny mouths ripped into the petals, ripped into the sepals, ripped into the stem, and caused the Grand Earl to faint in agony. Putrid nectar spilled forth from within it. Suddenly, though, something wholly unforeseen followed and came out as well.

It was a naked, elderly man.

The man, drenched in nectar, was no doubt the Grand Earl's original form. It seemed that in accordance with the Grand King's orders, he'd caused his fused form to swell up while hiding his proper body within the flower. A needle was stuck in his neck. Even so, he blinked and looked down reverently at his restored body. He tried to thank Elisabeth.

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter. Rats came raining down around him.

"...Huh?"

"Grand Earl, you do realize that this is torture, yes? There will be no saving you. You shall simply die in agony."

Hearing her gentle warning, the man's eyes went flush with shock. As they did, the rats began gnawing at his shoulders, gnawing at his ears, and gnawing at his nose.

One after another, the rats filled the man's body with holes as they burrowed deeper.

He grabbed rats like mad and hurled them away. However, their numbers proved far too great for him.

As the rats rained down in succession, they gnawed at him as if he were a block of cheese.

“Aah! Ahhhhhhhhhhhh! Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

The Grand Earl’s screams were hoarse and monosyllabic. He began dancing like a madman at the pain. His urine, blood, and chunks of flesh spilled out and mixed with the nectar at his feet. However, Elisabeth showed no signs of granting him pity.

Just as she’d said, there would be no salvation for him.

Eventually, the Grand Earl collapsed where he stood.

A few rats made their way into his exposed stomach. One dug out his eyeballs, and another made its way inside his skull. The rats had eaten through almost the entirety of both his body and the flower. Having eaten their fill, they rolled about, their original task all but forgotten. All at once, black feathers scattered into the air.

The roots, which had crept throughout the town, were all transforming into feathers. The underlings loitering among them, having lost the support of their demonic master’s mana, collapsed one after another, their innards having likely caved in.

Like an out-of-season snowfall, the black feathers poured down upon the seaside town.

One woman stood as she basked in them, as fiercely sinister as she was beautiful.

The bearded man rubbed his eyes repeatedly. Beside him, Kaito removed his gaze from Elisabeth and surveyed his surroundings. Seeing that the underlings’ corpses had crumbled into dust, a smile spread across his face. But then something he saw out of the corner of his eye made his face freeze.

As Kaito’s entire body stiffened, the bearded man murmured in shock.

“What...what in the world...? What could that...? I mean, what’s happening?”

“Don’t worry about it... Just take that kid and run for the remains of the Church’s office! Now that the demon’s dead, the land should be safe. Just hurry

and get as high up as you can!”

“Wait, but what are you going to do, son? You’re covered in blood...”

“Don’t worry about me, just go! Hurry, before...”

Struggling against the dizziness that still ate at his mind, Kaito rose to his feet. He glared at the putrid crimson sea.

Either due to having noticed the Grand Earl’s death or due to having received prior orders from the Grand King, a change was occurring in the corpse-filled sea. Kaito spoke, his expression grim.

“...before the tsunami hits.”

The crimson sea was slowly receding.

The flesh-colored jellyfish, the Grand Duke, smiled at its center.



“Hey, Elisabeth! Did you see what’s going on with the sea? What’re we gonna do?!”

“Master Kaito, Lady Elisabeth! Are you two all right?”

“Good job finding us, Hina! How were the kids?”

“I used floral scents to calm them down and get them to sleep. Then, Master Kaito, I followed the smell of your blood and arrived here! Your blood has a sweet smell to it, you see.”

“The fact that you know what my blood smells like is convenient but also kinda creepy.”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeek! Master Kaito, your wounds! You’re even more wounded than before! Damn you, demons, even if you all fell into Hell, I would never forgive you! May you all die another two thousand deaths! If they had graves, then I should like to go defile them right—”

“Settle down, you lot. You’re worsening my headache, which is no mean feat.”

Hearing Kaito and Hina’s vigorous exchange, Elisabeth was pressing down on her forehead.

There was nothing to block their view. The only thing before them was the crimson sea, transformed as it was into a pulpy corpse soup.

The three of them had gathered at the lighthouse overlooking the sea from the edge of the cape.

The first floor of the building, which had been constructed from pure-white stone, contained the lighthouse keeper's lodging. The second floor was where the fuel was kept, and atop the cylindrical building was long iron scaffolding where the fire was lit. Seashells and colored tiles were embedded in the spiral staircase winding around the tower, and a statue of a holy woman shedding tears of blood hung beside the fire basket.

Based on how tall and decorative it was, that lighthouse was likely one of the town's symbolic buildings.

After watching Elisabeth leave behind the remains of the flower to travel there, Kaito had hurriedly followed her. Hina arrived right as he did.

The situation was chaotic, and as the two of them hurried after Elisabeth, she studied the sea's transformation. The jellyfish was sucking in the viscous seawater, causing it to recede. Each time it did, its translucent cap swelled even further past its limit.

"Ah...so that's it."

Elisabeth crossed her arms. The runes stretching across her pale skin, up from her wrist to her shoulder and exposed sides, were an even deeper shade of crimson than they'd been before her fight with the Grand Earl.

"No demon with the power to cause a natural disaster has yet descended to our world. This tsunami shan't be caused by a tectonic shift; rather, that rotting jellyfish, the Grand Earl, plans to store seawater within its body and then violently release everything at once."

"Is there any way we can stop it?"

"If we kill it before then, the water it's stored shall likely still result in great waves, but the damage can be minimized. However, if it's able to expel the water as planned, a town of this size will be washed away."

“All the more reason to kill it right away.”

“However, therein lies the problem. The jellyfish is far out at sea, and any ship we could use to reach it has long since degraded. Attacking it directly is impossible. Even launching missiles with a catapult would not be effective at this range, and given my current mana situation, the odds it could repel such an attack are high. That being the case, our best option is execution by animal.”

Elisabeth snapped her fingers. Darkness and crimson flower petals swirled in the air.

The black and crimson converged and then burst. From there, a large, beautiful raven spread its wings. The wise, sly-eyed bird sat respectfully atop the metal fixtures on Elisabeth’s arm.

“With this, our ability to damage it is assured. However, using this method will take time. Transforming even a few of these to be able to inflict instant death would require more mana than I currently possess... Truly, this design is infuriating. Now then, what to do.”

Elisabeth lightly bit her lip. While she did, the tide was receding farther, and the jellyfish continued to swell.

Glaring at the sea with her emerald eyes, Hina raised her voice.

“If it is as you say, would it not be best to withdraw to the castle for now? Most of the town’s residents have already evacuated. Even if the buildings are washed away and destroyed, the loss of life will be minimal. We could even use the ruins as footing. If we left now and returned later, we could obtain much better conditions for our rematch.”

“Aye, if only we could. But should I overlook so much as the destruction of one little town, I would likely be estranged by the Church. Such are the restrictions placed on a shackled hound. ’Tis most troubling indeed.”

As he listened to Elisabeth and Hina talk, Kaito turned his eyes down and ruminated. Everything about the situation was terrible. The Church was placing unreasonable demands on Elisabeth. However, as far as the matter of fleeing went, Kaito too was against it.

If we flee now, even though the damages will be minimal, people will still die.

Kaito had told the man from before to escape to high ground. However, there were likely others who hadn't made it to shelter. There were probably also people who were injured and unable to leave. That said, though, even Kaito could tell that Elisabeth was running low on mana. She couldn't do the impossible.

What to do, what to do, what to do...? Think. At the end of the day, is there anything I can do here?

Or was he simply as powerless as always, unable to do anything?

The sea roared.

As it did, Kaito felt his eardrums tensing up. All sounds seemed distant to him. The change in his surroundings wasn't due to any spiritual abnormality on his part. His consciousness was growing dim due to blood loss. He felt the blood dripping down his neck and sticking to his clothes, and his skin grew oddly hot.

Kaito instinctively turned his attention to the unpleasant heat. It crawled along his body and reached the stone in his pocket, and the blue roses within began burning. Right as he realized what the sensation was, the phantasmal hand landed on his shoulder once more. He could distinctly feel the hand's cold weight.

"Now then, what to do indeed, my dear successor?"

The sweet, honeyed whisper reverberated in Kaito's ear.

The hand snapped its fingers.

Before he knew it, Kaito was standing alone in the darkness. Before him sat the extravagant beast-bone chair, replete with pelts.

Vlad sat upon it, gently stroking the skull armrests with the arrogance of a king.

His nobleman's coat fluttered as he rose from the chair. As the soles of his shoes clicked against the ground, he spoke in a familiar yet dignified voice.

"Given the situation you're in, shall I continue my lecture? I believe I mentioned it to you already. You can use your own pain as a fulcrum to ignite the mana within your body, but the magic that method will unlock for you is

tragically limited. Creating mana itself from the pain of others is far more efficient. In order to do that, you must either consume the meat of a demon...or summon one yourself."

Vlad looked at Kaito, gauging his response. However, Kaito offered no answer. Vlad shrugged and then resumed walking.

He waved his white gloved hands in the air like a conductor.

"Hearing that all of a sudden no doubt leaves a vague impression. To that end, I'm going to give you a chance to test it out. After all, I am something akin to your teacher. And what is a teacher if not one who looks after their pupils?"

"..."

"I and he no longer have any relation to each other. However, even without a contract and even with my death having caused him to return to a higher dimension, we spent enough time united that I can at least reach his tail. Demons feast on the pain of men. Using him, even if all you can manage is to reduce the pain you just felt into mana, it should prove rather interesting indeed. Now then, time for your real practical exam!"

Vlad stopped in his tracks and then clapped his hands loudly. Sparing not a thought to the possibility of Kaito refusing him, Vlad turned to him and made his theatrical declaration.

"At this moment, you shall take your first step toward greatness!"

"Man, you just love the sound of your own voice, don't ya?"

For the first time since he'd arrived in the darkness, Kaito spoke. His voice was low and hollow.

As he looked at Vlad, Kaito's eyes were full of fierce animosity. Vlad smiled and then tilted his head as if to ask Kaito what he planned to do.

Of course, Kaito had already made up his mind.

He took a step forward. He felt as though the young red-haired boy who had wished him happiness was watching him. The boy looked at him with eyes that questioned whether or not Kaito was really okay with this and a gaze full of worry and reproach.

Yeah, Neue, I know. This is a mistake.

Understanding that, Kaito spoke.

“If you’ve got something I can use, then hand it over already. I need it, for the sake of my future.”

“A most splendid answer!”

The next moment, Vlad reached out his hand and thrust it inside Kaito, *into his very soul.*

Kaito could feel a hand squish around in his abdomen.

He was assailed by a sharp pain as azure flower petals and darkness swirled around his organs.

A sinister light flashed behind his eyes, and his nasal cavity was filled with a sharp animal stench. A roar rang in his ears, and his leg brushed against high-quality fur. He could feel canine footsteps vibrate throughout his whole body, as they were causing the ground to shake and the air to vibrate.

Finally, he felt damp, rusty breaths near his face.

Is it sniffing me?

The first-rate hound was appraising the being before it.

It was checking to see if it was a person or if it was food.

...And then...

“Congratulations. You passed the first test.”

Before he’d noticed, Vlad had vanished from the darkness. A black dog’s tail, unconnected to anything, was dangling in the air in front of Kaito.

Dumbfounded, he raised his palm. Then, using the pain gathered within it—not just his but the pain he’d magically caused in the underlings, as well—Kaito grabbed onto the tail.

Geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, fu-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.

He could hear humanlike laughter.

Then Kaito opened his eyes.



“...Huh?”

When he came to his senses, Kaito found himself back on the roof of the lighthouse.

The crimson sea was still spread out before him. There was nearly no change in the position of the tide. Apparently, not much time had passed. Elisabeth and Hina, their faces grim, were still carrying on their discussion.

“Then, what if we were to develop the animal execution and the catapult simultaneously?”

“It will be rough, but that seems to be the best option... Failure is a possibility, but there’s nothing to be done for that.”

As he blinked, Kaito looked Elisabeth over. The force within her body was definitely weakened. However, it still boasted a thorny, dark, roselike beauty to it.

When I look closely, I can see that even now she has enough mana that I wouldn’t normally even be in the same league as her... That’s the Torture Princess for you. Now, as for me...

Kaito looked down at his hand. He could still clearly feel the velvety sensation of the black dog’s tail in it. Furthermore, there were sticky black hairs mixed in with blood pouring out from the wound.

Huh...I guess that really wasn’t a dream.

Frowning, he focused his attention on the uncomfortable sensation and checked the quantity of new mana swirling within his body. His calculations functionally amounted to sticking his hand in a pool of water to tell how deep it was. When he was finished, he nodded.

All right, with this, I can pull it off.

Kaito silently drew near Elisabeth and then touched the back of the large raven roosting on her arm. He ran his hand along its beautiful feathers, as if he were comforting it. His blood stained its feathers, and the dog hairs extending

from his palm twined around its wings.

As he did, its spine began to warp.

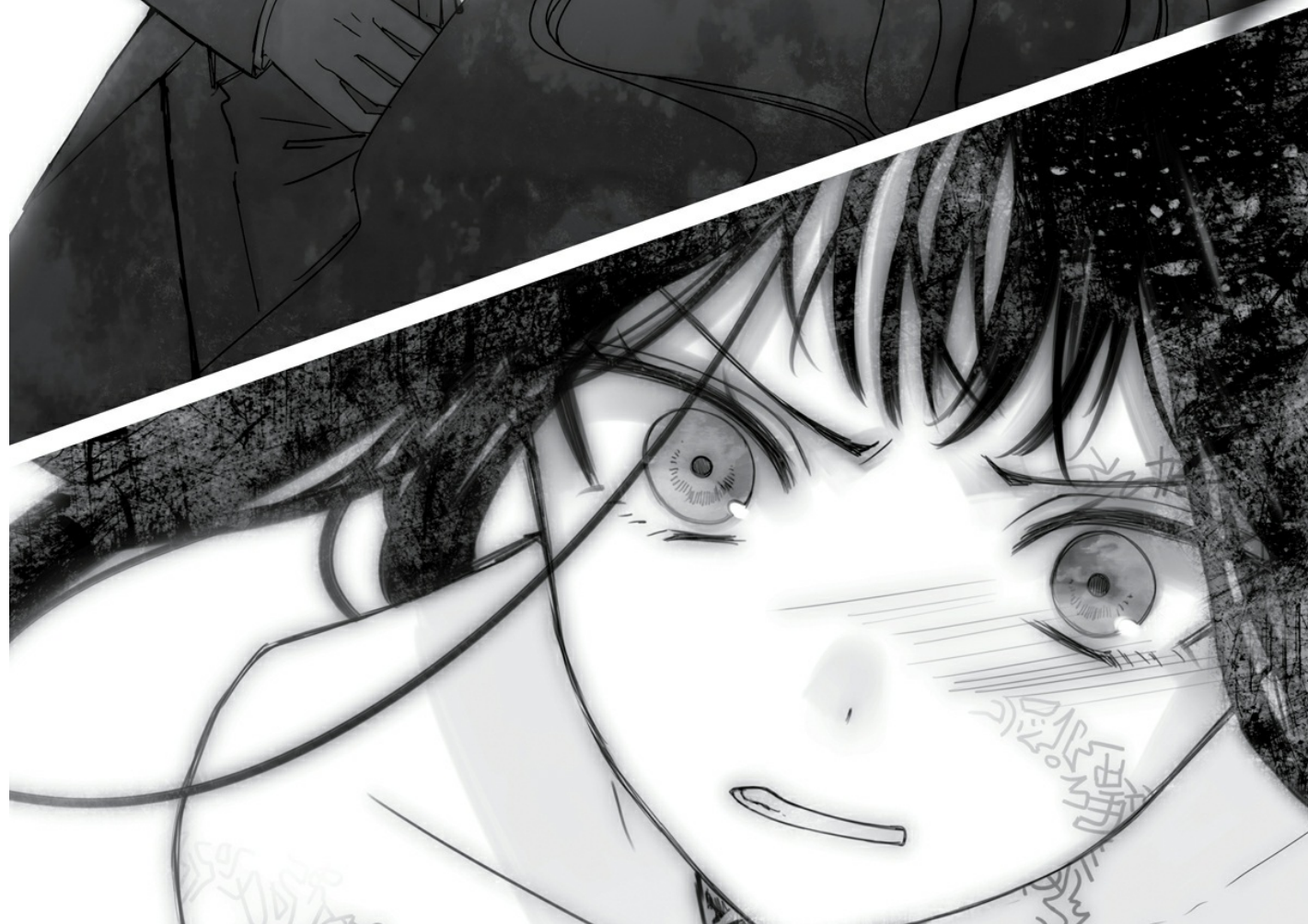
As the violent magical energy forced its way inside, the raven underwent a transformation.

“Hmm? ...Wh—?!”

Elisabeth looked up with a start. When she saw how the raven had mutated, she looked as though she’d been punched in the gut. After she looked doubtfully at Kaito, her eyes gradually filled with comprehension and rage.

“Kaito, you wretch...!”

Elisabeth’s arm shot out like an arrow, and she grabbed Kaito by the collar.



As she did, the raven's transformation continued. For an instant, hellfire burned in its jet-black eyes. Its small, slender face burbled and squirmed horrifically and transformed into that of a hound.

The raven was on the verge of resembling a gargoyle, with the head and torso of a beast and the wings of a bird. However, the transformation settled into a gentler configuration. At the end, the raven was left several times larger than it had been originally, with enormous wings, cruel talons, and a sharp beak.

It was a creature without peer, one who readily resembled raven royalty.

The raven flapped its wings boastfully. Elisabeth, on the other hand, was trembling with anger. She raised her arms, and Kaito's toes dangled in the air. She screamed in rage.

"What have you done?! What is that power?! Where did you obtain it?!"

"Wait, Elisabeth...more importantly... Could you make three more of the base birds? With my technique, I can strengthen them, but I can't make them from scratch—"

"You fool! There are some things you mustn't involve yourself with. Who knew you were so insipid?!"

"I haven't...obtained it...yet... It's supposed to be...a trial..."

"This is preposterous... Vlad should be dead! Why, then?"

"Elisa...beth... We can talk later. Now, we should focus on the ravens. At this rate, both of us are gonna be in deep shit."

Kaito made his argument dispassionately. As she looked at his calm—and in a sense, insane—demeanor, Elisabeth ground her teeth and roughly set him down.

Coughing, Kaito gave a light nod.

Yeah, that makes sense... I expected her to be pissed.

Everything, including Elisabeth's reaction, was unfolding within the bounds of his expectations. He had no reason to be afraid. Feeling another pair of eyes on him, Kaito turned. For some reason, Hina looked to be on the verge of tears.

Unsure of how to respond to her, he elected to wave to her.

He then turned his gaze back to Elisabeth, serious. She was clicking her tongue, her face twisted in anger. However, frustrated as her expression was, she once more called forth the swirl of darkness and petals.

“After this, I expect you to tell me everything. And should you refuse to talk, I’ll break out the thumbscrews.”

As she made her furious declaration, Elisabeth created ravens one after another. Insisting that he’d confess without need for torture, Kaito touched their backs as though baptizing them.

Eventually, the four kingly ravens were completed.

“Sky Burial.”

As Elisabeth spoke, the four birds took off in a circular formation. They flapped their wings harder than any raven should have been able to, crossing the sea and closing in on the jellyfish.

The four of them perched atop its translucent flesh and then dug their talons in and grabbed. They then each flew off in a cardinal direction.

The jellyfish’s skin tore, and seawater and bodily fluids came spilling out.

“Urgh... Ah, ahhhhhhhhh, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

The jellyfish screamed as it writhed in agony. However, even with the flesh pulled to its limit and starting to rip, the ravens showed no signs of stopping. As the jellyfish lost more and more seawater and fluid, it eventually ripped open into four sections resembling flower petals.

Massive decomposing chunks of flesh were expelled and floated gently on the water’s surface.

At the same time, the seawater it had vomited out rushed violently toward the lighthouse.

“Hold tight! ’Tis every man for himself!”

On Elisabeth’s mark, the three of them leaped into action.

The wave of seawater that had billowed forth from the jellyfish was taller

than the lighthouse. If they'd been ordinary people, they would have had no choice but to simply be engulfed and swept away.

All three of them grabbed hold of the sturdy saint statue and used their mana to help fix themselves in place. Countless corpses washed by them as the bloody water rushed up and surrounded them.

Hey, if this is all there is, then we'll probably get away with only a couple of the buildings on the coastline getting washed away!

As he desperately held his breath, Kaito felt relieved at that.

Then a fish *locked eyes with him*.

Upon further inspection, while it was indeed a fish, it was also not. It was swimming easily against the current, and it looked at Kaito and the others with a solemn male human face.

In fact, human faces were sprouting all over its fat body.

There was no vitality whatsoever in its dull eyes. It slowly opened its plump, odious lips.

Then the human-faced fish spat out its heart.

".....Huh?"

A certain scene flashed back across Kaito's mind.

A naked man had been inside the Grand Earl's flower. He'd hidden his real body within the petals. However, after the Grand Duke's jellyfish had been ripped open, nothing like that was there.

If the Grand King had forced the Grand Duke to change even his form and ordered him to vomit out his heart...

And if the flashy show the Grand Earl and Grand Duke put on had all been a trap...

"Elisabeth!"

The heart ruptured. Hundreds of arms passed through the wave and swam through the water.

The crimson arms latched onto Elisabeth. All the power went out of her body.

Kaito quickly grabbed her from behind before she was swept away by the wave. However, his own hand was about to slip off the saint statue.

“Master Kaito!”

With astounding reflexes and grip strength, Hina caught him by the collar with one hand.

Before long, the torrent of water passed. The rooftop was riddled with crimson puddles and piles of dead fish. Kaito shook Elisabeth’s limp body as it lay slumped over on the ground. As Hina ran her drainage systems, she knelt beside them.

“Elisabeth! Elisabeth, c’mon, snap out of it!”

“Lady Elisabeth, please respond! Lady Elisabeth!”

She didn’t reply. She had fought so heroically, yet she gave no response to their cries.

The jellyfish’s body, torn but not collapsed, was transforming into black feathers. Eventually, they collapsed in a surge and floated gently down onto the crimson sea. Azure flames burned atop the waves.

The subjugation of the Grand Earl and Grand Duke was complete.

And as for the result of the battle, Kaito and company had lost.

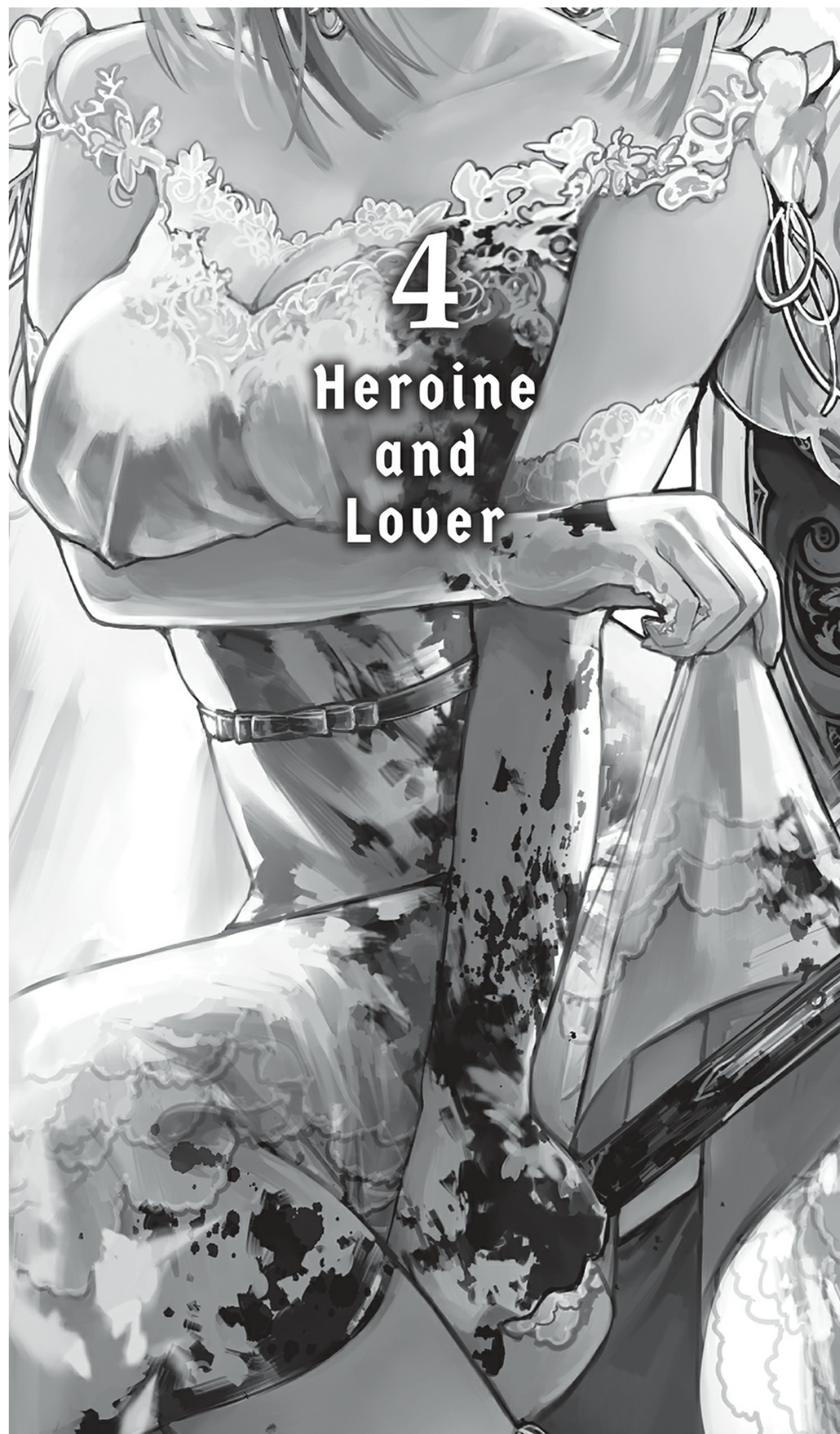
Hina



An automaton maid. She sees Kaito as her master and her lover. Though her particular brand of love places her snugly within the *yandere* category, she is of the devout variety and would gladly die for the sake of Kaito's happiness. Because she puts his safety so highly above her own, the odds that she would ever put him in personal danger are exceedingly low.

Hina





4

Heroine and Lover

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n

4

Heroine and Lover

Ever since he was a child, Kaito Sena had held heroes in disdain.

He had learned of the concept during the short period in which he'd attended school. For a time, he'd hoped that one would come and save him. But no matter how fervently he yearned, he continued receiving cigarette burns all over his body, getting his elbows scorched by lighters, having his toes broken, and being forced to beg for scraps of food from his father and his mistresses. As a result, he'd come to regard the concept of heroes as well as the various stories in which they appeared as ludicrous from the bottom of his heart.

Such a person couldn't possibly exist.

If there existed someone who amended the injustices of the world, then Kaito's pain and sorrow—or rather, his very existence itself—should have long been stripped away.

Ironically, the cruelty and pain accumulated within Kaito served to discredit the possibility that heroes existed. In a sense, he played the role of a villain, as his very life was the personification of how nonexistent and meaningless heroes were in the world.

Up to the day he was strangled to death, that perception of Kaito's had never changed.

Furthermore, his new world was devoid of heroes as well. While it was a fantastical world rich with swords and sorcery, the land was plagued with demons. There were no noble crusaders or legendary champions.

The only person fighting was the Torture Princess, a peerless sinner.

She was absolute evil, standing atop a mountain of corpses—yet those she crushed were even more evil than she.

Kaito Sena held heroes in disdain.

However, as far as villains went, the same didn't necessarily apply.



Kaito sat upon a plain chair in the stone bedroom. He had dark circles under his eyes.

Like a reenactment of the previous scene, Elisabeth was lying down on the bed in front of him. The crimson runes creeping along her body had grown even further, covering her pale body like briars. Periodically, she let out pained, feverish moans. Each time she did, Hina, who was standing at the ready by her bedside, stiffened up a little.

Other than diligently wiping away Elisabeth's sweat, there was little she could do.

A few days had passed since they'd returned from the port town and released the two children to their relatives, who had come alongside members of the Church. However, in spite of Hina's devoted care, Elisabeth hadn't resumed consciousness. Powerless, all that Hina and Kaito could do was wait for her to wake up.

Not being able to do anything sucks.

Atop his chair, Kaito put strength into his crossed palms. His wound had properly healed, and the power he'd temporarily gotten ahold of had vanished. He no longer felt the sensation of the black dog's tail on his skin.

Kaito still hadn't talked to anyone regarding what had happened then. Hina had cast a number of questioning looks in his direction but ultimately decided to focus on nursing Elisabeth. Having agreed with her decision, Kaito had kept his mouth shut.

As he gazed at Elisabeth's slender, crimson-encircled body, he let out the same murmur he had numerous times before.

".....Elisabeth."

".....Excuse me."

Suddenly, the two of them heard the voice of a third party.

Hina grabbed her halberd from the floor and then snapped to her feet. As she did, Kaito fluidly drew a knife from his pocket and pressed it against his palm. However, the presence on the other side of the door simply stood still, unmoving. Kaito and Hina tilted their heads.

For some reason, the other party seemed frightened.

“Hina, can you handle this?”

“Of course. Master Kaito, you should stand somewhere you aren’t visible from the doorway.”

After confirming that Kaito had taken cover, Hina approached the door and quickly threw it open. She swung her halberd, pressing it accurately against the scruff of their neck. The black mass threw up its hands in alarm.

A grieving voice called out from beneath a hood.

“I—I come in peace! I’m a bystander and an ally! I am your humble Butcher, friend to gourmands and vagabonds alike! I bring delicious meat! Every day! That’s right, it’s me!”

“Oh, hey, it’s the Butcher.”

“Me friend!”

“Please relax. I’m very sorry for my conduct. However, um...I believe that due to Elisabeth’s poor condition, we requested to put a hold on deliveries for the time being.”

Hina tilted her head to the side. The Butcher nodded in assent. He slowly lowered his hands and then brought the large bag covered in X-shaped patches he constantly carried with him into the room.

Perhaps in relief, he clutched his chest as he cast a pained gaze at Elisabeth.

“Oh, poor Madam Elisabeth... How could this become of a lady with such vigor?”

“Sorry, but she still hasn’t woken up. If you came to wish her well, then you’re out of luck.”

“No, that wasn’t my intention. I came here on a delivery—to deliver meat.”

“But we placed a hold...”

Hina’s reply fully conveyed her bewilderment. However, the Butcher shook his head back and forth.

“Indeed, my lovely Ms. Maid, you did put in such a request. But if Madam Elisabeth awakens and finds herself without fresh meat on hand, I think she would be sorely disappointed.”

“...Mr. Butcher.”

“It is disgraceful for a butcher to allow a client to go hungry. I have brought her usual selections with me, and as for payment... If it goes bad before Madam Elisabeth finds herself able to eat it, I will waive the fee.”

“Butcher, man, you...”

“Madam Elisabeth is quite the faithful patron of mine. And it brings me great joy when she cries out, “Tis delicious!” as she does. I pray that she recovers quickly that she may eat meat to her heart’s content once more.”

Tugging on the edge of his hood bashfully, the Butcher looked down and whispered rapidly. Kaito and Hina glanced at each other in surprise. They then spoke to the Butcher, their eyes full of emotion.

“My deepest thanks, Mr. Butcher. As Master Kaito’s eternal lover and servant, the spirit with which you carry out your duty has resonated deep within my gears. The thought alone is enough. I will gladly pay the fee out of my wages, so please accept it.”

“No, I’ll pay it. Thanks, Butcher... I’m sure Elisabeth will be overjoyed.”

“No, no, no, I’m simply doing my job. Hee-hee-hee, huzzah, huzzah! Success!”

“Hold up there.”

The Butcher danced around in delight. Realizing that he’d probably foreseen this turn of events, Kaito looked at him with half-dead eyes. However, after dancing and shaking his posterior around in joy, the Butcher suddenly stopped with a serious expression.

“Now, now, you two. You really don’t need to wear such gloomy expressions! Knowing Madam Elisabeth, she’ll be back on her feet in no time! Ah, that’s

right, I also have a get-well gift for her!”

The Butcher rustled around in his bag. At the end of the day, it seemed that his concern had been real. Kaito and Hina watched over his actions warmly. The next moment, though, their faces froze over.

The Butcher had pulled out a huge, droopy, mulberry-colored cut of meat.

“Aren’t you surprised? It’s troll liver!”

“Get out.”

“They say it makes the body grow big and strong.”

“You’re sounding like a swindler.”

“I am no swindler! I am a butcher! Everything I sell is as genuine as can be!”

“Ah, *but my dear fellows*, don’t they say that some things are problematic precisely because they are genuine?”

This time, for sure, Hina grabbed her halberd, and Kaito cut open his palm.

Hina positioned herself to protect the other three. As he protected Elisabeth and the Butcher, Kaito turned toward the window from which he’d heard the easygoing male voice.

At some point, its slatted shutters had been cut open, and the man responsible for butting in on the conversation was sitting on its frame. The strange man had bandages draped all over his body, and he was pressing the soles of his feet together. He lifted his silk hat.

“My a-apologies, is this a bad time?”

The man was strangely slender. Other than the hardened, dirty-looking bandages and the silk hat, he wore nothing. His mouth, which peeked out just barely from beneath the bandages, was curved into a crescent-shaped grin as he introduced himself.

“I, my dear fellows, am the Marquis! I apologize for this unseemly state I’m in! I was on the receiving end of some pu-nish-ment from our lovely Majesty the G-g-grand King, you see? Fuuuuck that infernal bitch! Damn, damn, damn, damn? Damn! Damn her to hell! M-my apologies.”

The Marquis gave a quick bow. A silver, brain-shaped needle was glittering on his nape.

Goose bumps ran down Kaito's spine. Upon closer examination, the Marquis's skin under his bandages was hideously burned. His white bandages were stained yellow with bodily fluids, his hair was missing, and his eyes were exposed and swollen. But what scared Kaito and Hina more than the details of his punishment was his name.

As the fourteen demons go, the Marquis is pretty high up there.

He wasn't a foe that the two of them could hope to take on. Even so, they stood in front of the bed to protect Elisabeth and the Butcher. His voice hoarse from tension, Kaito pushed out noise from the back of his throat.

"What do you want, Marquis?"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, ho-ho-ho-ho-ho, heave-ho? Eep!"

As he sang, the Marquis leaped off the window frame and dropped talkatively down to the floor. He then shook all over, like a stray dog. Immediately afterward, though, he rose up straight, as if yanked by a string, and placed a hand on his chest.

Kaito narrowed his eyes. Something was springing out from beneath the bandages.

Is there something stuck in his chest?

"P-p-p-p-p-p-please look, if you woul— No, no, no, stop it, stop it, I'll stop, I'll stop, forgive, forgive me, I'll do anything, please, no, stop, aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!"

As he uttered words of reluctance and fierce screams, the Marquis grabbed the thing springing out from his chest and yanked it forward without pausing. Before Kaito and Hina's eyes, both of them stunned into silence, he tore himself from his chest to his crotch and pulled out something rectangular. It was a dressing table, and no small one at that, adorned with a snakelike chain.

"Gah... Ack, argh... Blergh..."

Blood and mashed-up organs dripped off the mirror's frame.

As the Marquis frothed at the mouth and spewed up mucus, he used the last of his strength to stand the dressing table up on the floor. His wound had probably had magic applied to it beforehand, as it immediately sealed up.

Still propping the dressing table up, the Marquis fainted, his eyes rolling back in his head.

The mirror was filthy, covered in his blood and tallow. Suddenly, an ominous light burned within it. Then a scarlet figure appeared. Cheers, upbeat music, and most distinctly of all, a beguiling female voice rang out.

“So is this thing on? Oh, not yet? Is that so...? I feel as though it should have been properly activated. Are you certain? Oh dear, my, it is on! You fool, I’m through with you! Now then, begone! ...And as for you, Elisabeth, how do you do? So sorry for all the commotion.”

The Grand King shook her crow-feather fan and smiled. However, she seemed displeased with the image she was projecting and moved her head around in search of an angle that better showed off her beauty. Each time she did, the ample breasts peeking out from the top of her dress jiggled precariously.

As carefree as her behavior was, her presence was as sinister as ever.

“...Fiore, the Grand King.”

Kaito groaned in a low key. The blood and tallow were stuck especially thick near the mirror’s edges, so he couldn’t get a good sense of the Grand King’s surroundings. However, there appeared to be a great throng of people behind her.

He couldn’t tell what was going on, but occasionally he heard voices calling out the Grand King’s praises.

Finally satisfied with her face’s angle, the Grand King nodded. She adjusted her hair and then sighed.

“Oh, I had the perfect introduction prepared and everything...but I suppose things don’t always go according to plan. In any case, I had something to discuss with you, so I had the Marquis bring over a mirror for me. Is he still alive over there? If he’s not too incontinent, would you be so kind as to praise him for me? His ability to control minds is similar to mine, and on top of that, he’s quite the

narcissist. He's a very bad boy, who rarely does as he's told. Recently, though, he's been serving as a rather obedient mutt. I'm really quite grateful."

Her voice sounding truly appreciative, the Grand King inspected the blood running down the mirror from its reverse side.

The cheering from behind her had grown conspicuously rowdier. She turned and then waved and blew a kiss into the air. She then turned back toward the mirror before joining her hands in front of her face.

"Ah, that's right. I mustn't let the Marquis's efforts go to waste, so I really ought to get to the point. With the second Sacrifice having taken hold successfully, I plan to take the Marquis over there, the Grand Marquis, and over a thousand of my underlings and familiars and boldly attack your castle—but that would cause you some problems, wouldn't it, Elisabeth?"

The Grand King smiled sweetly and tilted her head to the side. Her eyes filled with compassion, she snapped her fan shut. Then, with the poise of an empress, the Grand King Fiore pointed it directly at the mirror and made her haughty invitation.

"Fleeing will do you no good. I will track you down to the ends of the earth, you see. You are a fish on my hook, and as such, I have a proposition for you. Bend the knee and serve me, little princess. I doubt you'd properly listen to my orders if I stuck a needle in you, so I'll simply accept you as you are. You would make a fine pet. I love all who are strong, not just men, and you...you aren't half-bad."

As far as the Grand King was concerned, that was probably one of the highest compliments she could give. Kaito and Hina frowned and looked at each other. Unconcerned about their reactions and Elisabeth's silence, the Grand King went on.

"In fact, I'll even allow you to bring that automaton with you as a dowry. As for that lover boy, I could do without him, but I'm sure I can find somewhere to store a piece of rubbish or two. And I'll treat you well. After all, now that I think about it, you are the beloved daughter of my dear friend Vlad. I'll cherish you from your head to your toes, as if you were my own child."

"That's not the kinda thing you're supposed to say to your children."

“While I am fond of Lady Elisabeth, I am Master Kaito’s maid and Master Kaito’s alone.”

Kaito and Hina spoke simultaneously. However, the Grand King paid them no heed.

Loud voices of praise rang out once more from behind her. She turned toward them and waved merrily. As she did, the blood and tallow staining the mirror dripped lazily onto the floor.

Then the Grand King turned back toward the mirror. Upon seeing her face, Kaito reflexively frowned.

Her expression had changed so drastically that he almost thought she was a different person. When she spoke, her features looked so elegant that she reminded him of La Guillotine.

“Now then, Elisabeth, enough with the tomfoolery. Let’s speak earnestly.”

The Grand King inhaled quietly and then took her time before continuing to speak seriously.

“The Church won’t save you. You will die. I will kill you, and you will die. Why, then, do you still insist on fighting? You have the right to stain yourself deep to the bone with evil and the power to do so, as well.”

Her thoughts inscrutable, she spoke on in a kind motherly tone.

“...Perhaps a story is in order. When I was a child, a good-hearted, foolish gardener caught my eye.”

Suddenly, the surface of the mirror wavered. A moody young girl and a gardener with a face that looked practically like a squished frog—but with a simple, genial expression—appeared on it.

The Grand King’s voice carried on.

“Day in and day out, the adults in my life showered me with sweet, affectionate lies. They hated my father, who’d come into wealth suddenly, but no matter what happened, they kissed up to him and constantly visited nevertheless. I was like a little queen. No matter what I did, the people around me never scolded me...but he alone did, and to make up for it, he never lied to

me. 'If you do bad things, punishment is sure to come, young miss.' 'God is always watching you, so you must strive to be a good person.' Oh, what foolish things he said to me. But I liked that about him... Oh, I did. Laughable, isn't it? I liked that about him."

The Grand King spoke in a subdued voice, almost as though she were embarrassed. The next moment, however, a grim spectacle flashed across the mirror's surface.

The man from before had been stripped naked and hung up from a tree. His body was swollen so badly he looked like a fresh-baked loaf of bread. He had been struck all over and was dying.

A young girl carrying sweets was looking up at him in a daze. The basket in her arms had enough baked sweets for two, so it seemed she'd been planning on sharing them with someone.

"But he died after being framed for a crime by the other servants. They said that he'd stolen my mother's golden comb and went out womanizing with the proceeds from selling it... What a lark. No other man was as straitlaced and devout as he, but...nobody lent an ear to that unattractive man's clumsy explanations."

The basket tilted over, and the baked sweets tumbled out. They rolled along, accumulating dirt from the ground as they went.

Then the image faded away. The Grand King returned to the frame.

Her lips were twisted ever so slightly, and her eyes were narrowed, as if she were glancing into the distant past. However, she eventually shook her head lightly from side to side, as if to say there was no use crying over spilled milk.

"It's a trivial little tale. Yet, as a fable, I find it ever so relevant. Elisabeth, some day you, too, will understand. No matter how we amuse ourselves, live out our days, and die, that's all there is to the world. Good, evil—it's all the same. None will praise us, and none will punish us. And for the world to condemn you and then refuse to reward you for your efforts...I can't bear to sit by and watch."

The Grand King then brought her story to a sudden, somehow lonely end.

"You remind me of myself, in my youth."

After hearing what she had to say, Kaito gulped.

Her thoughts aligned with his, if only a little.

The Torture Princess needed to atone. And she deserved to die grandly atop the pile of corpses she'd created. But was the punishment truly designed to shove all the responsibilities onto her and then look away?

I, for one, don't think it is... And she's right. I can't bear to just sit by silently and watch it, either.

Kaito bit down on his lip. Elisabeth had yet to respond even once. Even so, the Grand King finished talking. She turned around, and her crinoline dress shook as she walked away.

Pulled by her rings, a number of underlings followed after her.

The mirror had cleared up, and the scene behind her was finally visible.

“—!”

As he saw it, Kaito suppressed an intense urge to vomit.

The Grand King was inside a massive circus tent. Countless men and women clamored from the audience. They were weeping, fervently clapping, and shouting out the Grand King's praises.

The audience's gaze was focused on a circular stage, atop which was a carousel. It was decorated as colorfully as a cake, and the people riding its blade-maned horses had their mouths stuffed with barbed wire. An underling with a bag over its head was supplying the carousel's power and changing the speed at which it cranked the carousel's handle on a whim.

Each time the wooden horses jerked up and down, the oscillations of their victims' bodies caused their cuts to deepen and fountains of blood to spill forth.

The men and women in the audience raised their voices frenetically. However, one of them raised their voice a beat too late, possibly due to shock. An underling dragged her up to the stage. Her fierce screams were cut off when her mouth was stuffed full of barbed wire.

The Grand King turned around. The chains on her hands rattled as she raised them to gesture to the Hell behind her.

“Good, evil—it’s all the same.”

“She’s a monster!”

Kaito retracted what he’d thought earlier. He couldn’t agree with a single thing that came out of that woman’s mouth.

Anyone who enjoyed a spectacle like that was worthless. Kaito could have said it aloud. However, there was nobody there with the power to convey the truth of those words to that arrogant woman.

The Grand King spoke softly, as if she were looking down from above on humanity like they were worms.

“We have the right to oppress them, Elisabeth.”

“What do you think you are, sow, a god?”

A sharp noise rang out, and a lance pierced through the mirror’s face.

Shattered fragments of silver glittered as they danced through the air.

Awakened by the impact, the Marquis’s toes scraped against the stone floor when he took the attack after it passed through the mirror. He somehow managed to remain standing, supporting the dressing table all the while. From beyond the mirror’s cracked surface, the Grand King’s smile grew even deeper. The image she now gave was quite twisted, and a cold voice bored down on her.

“None possess that right. Not you, nor I, nor the people, nor kings, nor gods possess it.”

As he turned his gaze toward the source of that forceful declaration, Kaito breathed a sigh of relief.

A beautiful woman was standing atop the bed, as sharp as a blade.

“Elisabeth.”

The bondage dress she wore, crafted from her mana, seemed to be on the verge of dissolving. Its black cloth, which barely covered her body, hung in the air with the uncertainty of a shadow. Her skin was even more exposed than usual, and it was covered in the invasive crimson runes. However, her violated

body didn't stop her from looking down on the Marquis.

She clicked her tongue and then went on a displeased tirade.

"And who is it you're saying you were in your youth? What a joke, Grand King. Care not to misunderstand me. Worldly rewards have naught to do with my actions as the Torture Princess. All I'm doing is paying the fee for the plate I licked clean, the plate topped with meat and blood and pleasure. A fattened sow such as yourself who refuses to acknowledge the annihilation waiting at the end of her road of slaughter and tyranny has no right to speak."

"Elisabeth, you..."

"Why have you failed to notice? Good and evil—all the same? What a riot. Evil carries with it retribution. What you try to play off as the truth of the world is *naught but your own arrogance*."

Elisabeth stared straight at the Grand King, her gaze filled with deep, frigid scorn.

With her animosity as bare as a wolf's, the self-proclaimed sow carried on.

"Don't use the past to justify yourself. All you're doing is taking a single convenient aspect of it and speaking as if it is a unilateral truth. You know, Grand King, *I pity you*. You *can't bear to sit by and watch*? Spare me your mercy. If you wish to torment me, then do so. If you wish to kill me, then do so. In any case, my death will be a cruel, solitary one. So be it. However, I've no intention of going down quietly. Should you cut off my head, I shall latch on with my teeth and rend you limb from limb."

Her position was overwhelmingly disadvantageous, and Elisabeth's face contorted even further.

With a smile the very picture of evil, she made one more declaration.

"I look forward to it, Your Majesty the Grand King! Let's see just how far the face of a hag who forces others to praise her can twist!"

"...Don't get all cocky at being shown a bit of kindness, little girl."

The Grand King's mask ruthlessly peeled off. Her beautiful, composed, showy-but-merciful expression had vanished.

As she turned toward Elisabeth, her sinister appearance truly befitted the demon she was.

“I’ll make a declaration, then. I won’t let you die peacefully—I will ravish you, violate you, rip out your intestines while you yet live, put them back, and grant you all the pains this world has to offer until you desperately beg and plead to me, cursing your own existence.”

“Splendid, what a fitting end for a torturer! But as you have your fun, the world will no doubt strike back at you...and I would have it no other way, Grand King. Here in my castle, I shall wait for my death and for your blood to be spilled.”

“You bark well! I hope you won’t regret this, Elisabeth Le Fanu.”

The Grand King snapped her fingers, and the light faded from the mirror’s surface.

As it did, the Marquis pitched forward. His whole body trembled and convulsed as he groveled on his hands and knees. However, he suddenly placed his hands on the ground and then leaped high into the air like a grasshopper.

Worried that he was planning to vomit out his heart, Kaito and Hina put up their guards. However, the Marquis successfully landed on his feet, gave a deep bow, and began awkwardly walking toward the window.

Hina aimed her halberd at his back but then lowered it. Kaito nodded, agreeing that she’d made the right decision.

The Marquis has the power to control minds. Honestly, I’m not sure if he can use it while the Grand King is controlling him, but...we shouldn’t carelessly attack him.

The Marquis scrambled over the window’s frame and then vanished from sight as though he’d fallen.

At the same time, Elisabeth collapsed to one knee atop the bed, her power spent. Kaito and Hina gasped.

The first one to react had been the Butcher. He’d leaped out from the shelves that he’d hidden himself in to support Elisabeth. He shouted as he held her

shoulders in his scaly arms.

“Madam Elisabeth, please snap out of it! Look, it’s me, the Butcher! Your friendly neighborhood Butcher has you! Come now, Mr. Dim-Witted Servant, Ms. Lovely Maid, make haste!”

“I’m coming! Elisabeth, are you okay?!”

“Lady Elisabeth, please don’t push yourself! You must lie down!”

“My apologies. I’ve caused you all trouble... These runes truly are an annoyance.”

Elisabeth laid down on the bed, and Hina pulled a blanket over her. As her head sank into her pillow, Elisabeth gazed at her two servants.

Her face lit up a tiny bit. For an instant, her eyes softened with the distinct shape of a smile.

She then let out a small breath. She spoke softly, almost as if she were an aged king discharging an important adviser.

“The situation is as you heard. Over a thousand foes now make for the castle. I intend to fight, but I’ve no wish to get you lot mixed up in it. If you wish to flee, then do so. I’ve lived the solitary life of a wolf, and I shall die the pathetic death of a sow. All on my own. There’s no need for you all to come with me—you may help yourself to whatever riches you please as you go.”

“What’re you talking about, Elisabeth?! That’s nonsense!”

“I concur. Think about what you’re saying, Lady Elisabeth!”

“Hina, you’ve served me well. I shan’t forget your delicious cooking, nor how devoutly you nursed me... From here on out, live as you wish, with as much energy as your heart desires. I wish nothing but happiness upon you... And as for you—”

Elisabeth then looked up at Kaito. She snorted and then spoke quietly but firmly.

“You fool... You utter imbecile...”

“Geez, Elisabeth, even now, of all times?”

“You had the fortune of obtaining a second life... Just stop already. It’s...fine.”

Kaito swallowed. A gentle smile spread across Elisabeth’s face before him.

“You’ve done enough.”

For a moment, Elisabeth reached out. Right as her elegant fingertips were about to touch the wound Kaito had inflicted on his palm, though, she stopped and tightly grasped her own hand.

Gazing at Kaito and Hina both, she continued speaking in a distant, hazy voice.

“Don’t let yourselves be chained down by anything... Serve only...yourselves... ‘Tis...for the best. I...”

Her eyelids slowly drooped. Kaito and Hina—Kaito in particular—swallowed down the words that were leaping into their mouths. Elisabeth, as if in a dream, continued speaking, her eyes hollow.

“I killed, I killed... And I continue to kill... My father, the...demons...”

Then she gently fell asleep.

Even assailed by pain and extreme fatigue, she had rejected the Grand King’s invitation. She fell back into a comatose state. As he looked at her sleeping face, Kaito ground his teeth so hard they could have cracked.

He desperately fought against himself to avoid letting out the anger bubbling in his chest.

What do you mean, there’s no need for me to come with you?! What do you mean, I’ve done enough?! We’ve still got plenty of time left together, right? I told you that, didn’t I?!

“And hey, you bringing me back to life and summoning me here must have been some kind of fate... So until you start walking the road to Hell, I’ll try and stick by your side for as long as I can, even if I’m the only one.”

Kaito had once said that to Elisabeth.

Elisabeth would die alone. Not even a demon would be by her side then. But perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad for one human to stay by her side until that time came.

Throughout Elisabeth Le Fanu's bloody life, she was accompanied by a single foolish servant.

Kaito had thought that sounded just fine.

And there was one other important truth that he recalled.

The Torture Princess had taken pleasure in killing and slaughtering her people. Perhaps her heinous deeds, committed without fear of God, were all for the sake of extending her own life.

Or perhaps they were for the sake of defeating her “father,” whose power and allies had grown well past the point where any normal person could stand against him.

Her motives would remain a mystery.

She hadn't once said.

“Mr. Dim-Witted Servant...are you all right? That's quite the face you're making.”

“...Master Kaito, pardon me, but—”

Hina and the Butcher cautiously called out to Kaito. However, he wasn't listening. He clenched his fists and then took off in a dash.

“Mr. Servant!”

“Master Kaito!”

Kaito left the two of them and Elisabeth behind as he ran off and pulled open the door. He raced down the deserted hallway. His breath was ragged, and his eyes were burning with passion and fixated on the end of the passage before him.

He felt that something was wrong.

He didn't know what it was, but he knew that there was something off about the whole situation.



The gray sky peeked in through the hole in the throne room's wall. It was overcast again. The thick clouds looked like the belly of a whale as they sat

above the trees.

Buffeted by the damp wind and dim light, Kaito stood in the center of the room's stone floor and held a knife over one of his hands.

He spread out his palm, which he'd split open slightly during the Marquis's raid. After giving a short nod, he deliberately plunged his knife into the cut. The knife buried itself in his flesh with a horrible squelch. After cutting to the depth he needed, he held the knife directly over the floor. His overflowing blood fell in a line on the stone.

Using his blood as ink, Kaito drew a rectangular symbol.

“—*La* (open).”

At his command, the blood loudly transformed into crimson flames. The fire burned fiercely atop the stone floor and then vanished without a trace. A black door appeared in its wake. Kaito didn't touch it, yet it opened on its own from within like clockwork. A dimly lit space spread out inside it.

It was the entrance to Elisabeth's Treasury.

“Oh, good, that worked. Go me.”

Kaito breathed a sigh of relief. He'd seen before how Elisabeth opened the Treasury. However, that alone wouldn't have been enough to let him unlock it. In spite of that, though, he'd spontaneously trusted his intuition and managed to open it up.

Elisabeth had said that “all it takes to become able to use magic is a small trigger.” Until then, whenever he'd been on the verge of death, his soul had resonated with the powerful mana in her blood and played back her memories. Now that he was able to call forth the mana in her blood that flowed within his body, perhaps some information had spontaneously passed through it as well.

Kaito took a step inside the Treasury. Rectangular steps floated in the gloom at fixed intervals, forming a gentle spiral. When he peered down from the edge, nothing but the steps were visible. A tepid wind simply blew upward. Kaito nodded once and then leaped down onto the second step.

“Here we go.”

The stairs had no handrails, but Kaito took wide, unfaltering strides down them. After a short while, rubbish and torture devices began coming into view around him.

“...Somewhere around here maybe?”

Kaito stopped and then began looking for something. The thing that he was looking for was something that didn't get used incessantly but not too infrequently, either. Elisabeth had probably tossed it in the Treasury's upper levels.

Eventually, Kaito spotted his target at the feet of a bloody, rusty Iron Maiden.

It was an orb made of thin paper, a magical device that the Church had used to contact Elisabeth when they were ordering her to carry out the Kaiser's subjugation.

“There we go. Now, as for turning it on... Although even if I can, there's no guarantee it'll connect...”

Kaito nervously set it atop his bloodstained palm. Blood soaked into it, turning the paper crimson. However, it suddenly made a noise and then returned to its original shade of white.

The blood had vanished, pigment and all.

The orb then began emitting a pale-blue light, as though it had used the vanished blood as a power source.

It then floated in the air, shining as it began rotating. Eventually, a figure appeared on the orb's surface.

Having won the first of his gambles, Kaito clenched his fist. The transmission had connected with someone. The next problem was where and who it was connected to. Kaito tried to make out who the figure was. However, the image was blurred, as though covered in a layer of fog, and it was difficult to even make out their features.

Kaito frantically strained his eyes, knowing that if he could at least make out the front of their neck, he'd probably be able to tell if they were a member of the Church or not. While he was doing that, the figure suddenly spoke curtly.

Kaito recognized that overly characteristic voice.

"...What business do you have, Elisabeth?"

"Godd Deos... For real? Damn, looks like I pulled a winner."

Kaito mumbled in amazement. It looked like he'd successfully contacted the person he'd expected to.

Godd Deos was a head executive of the Church and the person solely responsible for dealing with Elisabeth. Kaito doubted that he was the kind of person who one could just randomly get ahold of. It appeared that his hypothesis—that the orb was a special piece of magical communication equipment, a rare item with a direct link to Godd Deos—had been correct.

Godd Deos was also the person who'd passed down the order to believe in Elisabeth's vow not to form a contract with a demon, promising that in the unlikely event that she did, he would offer up his own life to seal her away. He was quite possibly the best person to make an appeal to regarding Elisabeth's poor condition. However, he was also the person who'd ordered her to defeat the Kaiser, telling her to do some good for the world before she died.

Kaito braced himself. However, before he could talk, Godd Deos spoke in his usual calm, doubtful voice.

"That voice isn't Elisabeth's. Who are you?"

"I'm Elisabeth's servant, Kaito. Kaito Sena."

"Ah, the 'Good Soul' Elisabeth summoned from another world. What business do you have with me? Did you get Elisabeth's permission before using my precious orb?"

"Godd Deos, Elisabeth is in critical condition right now. Please hear me out. Her death would cause problems for you guys, too, right?"

"Give me details."

Godd Deos's response to Kaito was to the point. He then closed his mouth.

Kaito took a deep breath. It appeared that he didn't need to worry about being immediately hung up on. He'd cleared the first hurdle. The rest was all up to his explanation.

He wet his tongue and then began rapidly thinking and talking.

“First of all, the Kaiser’s death set the Grand King into motion. By using up the hearts of the other demons, she can cast Sacrifice...and with it, she sealed away Elisabeth’s power.”

Stumbling over his words, Kaito somehow finished his explanation, up through the back-and-forth battle at the port town and the Grand King’s declaration. He should have been able to properly convey Elisabeth’s poor state. He finished with an entreaty.

“At this rate, the Grand King is going to kill Elisabeth. At best, they’ll take each other out. You guys over at the Church have to do—”

“I see. That’s more or less how we perceived the situation from our end.”

“...Say what?”

Unable to parse the information he’d just been given, Kaito let out a dumb exclamation. Godd Deos offered no reaction to his display of impoliteness.

You mean...the Church already knew?

Finally, Kaito understood what that meant. He flared up at the silent orb.

“What are you talking about?! Elisabeth’s about to get killed! If the Torture Princess dies, that’s a problem for you Church guys up in your spectator seats, right?! If you already knew all that, then why—?”

“If the Church were to send every paladin in their employ to reinforce the defenses at Elisabeth’s castle, there is a possibility that they could turn around her situation. However, doing so would amount to throwing away the defense of the capital and all our major cities.”

“Say what?”

Kaito let out another dumb exclamation. Godd Deos spoke in a tone without sentiment, a tone far removed from anything so imprecise as sentiment.

“The capital accounts for three-tenths of our total population and is the center of our economic and political systems. If it were attacked, humanity would find itself in quite the predicament. The Grand King is no fool. If we deployed our paladins, she would strike in their absence. And a few reinforcements would

amount to nothing more than a drop in the bucket. After all, there's no guarantee we could defeat her, even if we were to deploy our entire forces. And what about transporting Elisabeth to the well-defended capital, you might ask? There was great backlash to even leaving her alive. At worst, she could be taken to the stake on the spot."

"That's—"

"In short, we have no cards to play. Losing Elisabeth is regrettable, but at the moment our best option for victory is to have her fight the Grand King. With no risk of dragging others down with her, the Torture Princess should be able to go into the fight prepared to conclude it in mutual defeat. Afterward, we plan to attack the Grand King in her weakened state. The worst-case scenario would be deploying all our paladins and then having them wiped out along with the Torture Princess and losing all our defense. That is a gamble we are not prepared to make."

"All that option amounts to is buying yourselves a little extra time. Or are you saying that you guys can take on the rest of the demons?"

"We likely won't be able to destroy them. However, with the Kaiser gone, we should be able to fortify the capital and major cities to the point where they can stave off invasion. Many in the outlying regions will die, but humanity won't perish. After that, we'll likely enter a long period of equilibrium with the demons. During that time, we plan to search for options."

"...But you're just going to throw her away? You've made her fight all this time. Now you're saying that you don't care if she dies?"

"We are not throwing her away. We simply have no cards to play. And don't forget, servant. While she is an effective tool, she is also a sinner. In the end, she will be executed without fail. It's no different if she dies now—either way, her death will be ghastly."

Godd Deos laid out the truth dispassionately. He spoke mechanically on the nature of Elisabeth's offences.

"That woman has left far too many corpses in her wake. The slaughtered masses will not permit compassion, and the butchered knights will not approve of amnesty. No matter how many good deeds she piles up, the numbers of the

dead will never shrink. In following, the fact that she is a sinner is the reason that we unsparingly whip her like a bound dog.”

Kaito clenched his fists. A kind of truth lurked with Godd Deos’s cold words.

The reason the Church was making Elisabeth pile up good deeds was not to commute her sentence but likely to save her soul after she died. No atonement she could make would reach the dead. The sentence for the crimes she’d committed in life had already been handed down.

Furthermore, it made complete sense for the Church to prioritize the safety of the people over that of the Torture Princess. Leaving the capital exposed for her sake would be like sacrificing one’s king in chess to protect their queen. In spite of that, though, anger bubbled up in Kaito’s chest.

He wrung a dry, composed voice out of his throat.

“So basically, it’s all your guys’ fault for being weak, right?”

“...Excuse me?”

“You guys, who didn’t pay a dime, who sacrificed nothing, are casting stones at someone who pulled a sword out from a mountain of corpses. You commit no crimes, and you don’t falter for an instant. And that amounts to jack shit. You’re doing jack shit, after all. But you still see fit to hand out your lofty opinions. Still, you call others sinners.”

“Servant.”

“If you guys had just been stronger, the Torture Princess wouldn’t have even been born, would she?”

Kaito ripped into one of the Church’s chief executives. He didn’t know why the Torture Princess had chosen to fight. She’d never once said. He didn’t know if that interpretation was right. But he would spit on anyone who ignored that possibility and cast stones at her.

After a few seconds’ silence, Godd Deos surprisingly affirmed the rebuke in his unchanging tone.

“Indeed, our powerlessness is a sin.”

“If you agree, then—”

“However, servant. At this point, it is impossible for us to muster enough power to be of support to Elisabeth. And the fact remains that the Torture Princess is a person who deserves to be reviled. As the representatives of the masses, we cannot pardon her of her crimes. Elisabeth Le Fanu pulled a sword out from a mountain of corpses. We are the representatives of those corpses. Just as you stand by the side of the Torture Princess, we stand with the long ranks of the deceased and their bereaved.”

Kaito stared silently up at the orb. He couldn't make out the eyes or nose of the figure within, but he felt a gaze back from it.

Godd Deos was staring directly at Kaito, without a shred of shame.

“She trampled corpses, drank their blood, and obtained power. Do you think that we can praise anything built with that power? No matter what reason she may have had, evil is evil. Without judgment, the world's order will be thrown into disarray. That is the kind of thing she became. And she knew that.”

“Elisabeth...”

“I ask you again, servant. Did you receive her permission to use my precious orb?”

This time, Kaito glued his mouth shut. An awkward, heavy silence fell. Then Kaito curtly responded.

“No. I didn't get permission.”

“I suspected as much...fool. However, as a friend of her father's, it brings me joy to know that she has a servant who worries for her. For her to have obtained a companion such as yourself at the end of her bloody path... Surely, she too is the recipient of God's grace.”

“...God's, huh?”

Murmuring softly, a deep frown stretched across Kaito's face. He began pondering something. The orb was probably designed primarily to transmit sound, and as such, Godd Deos most likely couldn't see his expression. Even so, when he continued speaking, his voice contained a surprising degree of sincerity for someone talking to a servant of the Torture Princess and a boy who was the target of an inquisition.

“As Elisabeth is one of God’s children, we sincerely hope that she overcomes the trials placed before her and that the good deeds she commits allow her soul to find salvation in the afterlife.”

“...God, huh?”

Again, Kaito responded with that word alone. Suddenly, all his tension drained away. As a matter of fact, his entire body relaxed, and he sat down upon the stairs. Dangling his legs off the stair’s edge, he gazed absentmindedly off into the gloom in a pose that made it look like he was relaxing.

Out of nowhere, his eyes flashed with the innocent light of a young boy.

Abruptly, Kaito began talking about something completely unrelated.

“You know, I don’t think heroes exist.”

“Heroes? I don’t quite follow.”

Godd Deos’s response was one of confusion, which was perfectly reasonable. Kaito laughed foolishly at him. With distant eyes, he looked off at somewhere other than where he was.

“You know, like crusaders or champions. At first, I wanted someone like that to save me. But before long, I stopped thinking that anything like that existed in this world. There’s nobody who unconditionally protects the weak, who saves others, who puts an end to injustices or brings about righteousness. If there was, then there wouldn’t be people like me who get beaten up and eventually killed off, would there? And you know...”

“—”

“...that sounds a whole lot like God.”

Kaito spoke quietly and bluntly. Godd Deos’s reply was a beat late.

As one of the heads of the Church, it was a declaration that he could have denied, even if he had to lie. The argument was crude, certainly not something that could be used to cast suspicion on long-standing religious doctrine. Perhaps the reason Godd Deos’s response was delayed was because Kaito’s voice had the awkward, pure tenor of a child’s to it.

With the voice of a child asking if God exists, Kaito talked about how he

didn't.

"I guess He doesn't exist, after all."

"God is one who offers prayers, one who saves—"

"No, your doctrine's all well and good. But I'm talking about me here."

As he spoke, Kaito's energy returned, and he rose to his feet.

He looked as though he'd forgotten something. He stuck his hand in his trouser pocket and then heaved a heavy sigh.

"I'm sure there are places where God and heroes exist. But what I'm saying is, they don't exist where I am. I'm saying that *they weren't there for me...* But your explanation made sense to me."

"It certainly doesn't sound like it did."

"Nah, I can see that I was being a dumb-ass. If someone were to ask if the Torture Princess was good or evil, then obviously the answer would be evil. It was crazy to ask the allies of her victims to come and save her. If I were on the side of her victims, then I'd be cheering from the rooftops to work her to the bone and then put her to the stake. Which means that this doesn't have anything to do with you guys. I'm the one she summoned, and this is really all just me being selfish, so it's really my problem."

"Servant...what do you mean to say?"

"What I'm trying to say is that person who saved me wasn't God or a hero. It wasn't faith, and it wasn't you guys."

Kaito looked up directly at the orb.

The things he was saying were little more than a joke. There was no meaning or logic behind them. Even so, he spoke his mind, the uncertainty and anguish in his expression gone.

"It was the Torture Princess—the most evil woman in the world."

Once, a woman had forced a miracle onto a young boy who lived in a world without gods or heroes. She'd granted a second life to a person who'd been worked to the bone and known nothing but pain.

That had been—

It had been a pain in the ass, it had been awful—and it had been wonderful beyond compare.

“So I’m not going to rely on you guys, Godd Deos; I’m just going to do what I can. I’ve made up my mind.”

“Wait, what do you intend—?”

“I don’t have any regrets. So no matter what outcome awaits us, you guys should make sure that you don’t, either.”

Kaito raised his bloodstained hand. A spear of ice shot out of his palm. With a sharp sound, it pierced through the orb. The call cut off.

Kaito stuck his hand back in his pocket. He breathed in deep and then exhaled.

Then he tightly grasped the stone, which was emitting heat from within its cloth confines.



Kaito ascended the gentle slope of the Treasury’s stairs. The higher he went, the more the gloom cleared up. Light shone down from the rectangular entrance at the top.

As he followed the light with his eyes, he saw Hina standing beside the hole.

Her face was strained with tension, and she was looking down into the gloom.

“Hey there, Hina.”

“Master Kaito...”

As she noticed Kaito and their eyes met, her beautiful face relaxed and she breathed a sigh of relief.

Kaito, having finished climbing the stairs, stood in the throne room.

At some point, the sky outside had taken on the hue of twilight. It appeared that the thick clouds had drifted away in the wind as though swimming through the sea. The room was filled with golden light.

The massive, delicate tapestries decorating the walls were also lit by splashes of light, and Hina's silver hair shone even more beautifully. Facing her, Kaito spoke.

"Sorry for running off on you like that. How are Elisabeth and the Butcher?"

"Lady Elisabeth is sleeping at present. As for Mr. Butcher, he said that due to the late hour, he plans on leaving after having dinner. Until then, he plans on watching over Elisabeth, which is why I came here."

"Still sticking around after all that... I can't say I'm not grateful, but damn, that guy's got nerves of steel."

Kaito spoke with a voice full of admiration, although the fact that his mental image of the Butcher was giving him a big thumbs-up irritated him somehow. Then he realized that his hand, which was sticking halfway out of his pocket, was drenched in blood. His butler uniform was covered in dark-red stains.

Realizing how bad it must look to Hina, Kaito frantically tried to explain.

"Uhhh, Hina, this is, uh—"

"Please forgive me for my rudeness, Master Kaito."

After murmuring rapidly, Hina dashed across the room and wrapped her arms gently around his back. She then stooped down a bit and buried her face in Kaito's shoulder. Her silver hair rustled pleasantly against his cheek.

Hina spoke to Kaito, who had stiffened up in surprise, in a muffled voice that sounded like she was on the verge of tears.

"I'm so glad you're all right... I feared that perhaps you weren't going to return."

"Wait, Hina, why? I only... I just went to go get something."

"Recently, it feels like you've been becoming more and more distant, Master Kaito... And it feels like you're getting hurt in places where I cannot reach you. The magic you're using has a dangerous aura to it...and that pit down there is dark and hollow and terrifying. I thought that you might have been sucked in by it. Please don't go down there on your own. Please don't leave me alone... I beg of you."

“Wh—? Huh?”

Kaito’s voice was full of confusion. It was true that the Treasury was a magical space filled indiscriminately with things brought over from Elisabeth’s old castle. It lacked so much as handrails, and if one touched the wrong thing within it, they were liable to die. Even so, there was no reason for a powerful automaton like Hina to fear it so.

Thinking on her words, Kaito suddenly recalled a certain scene.

There was an illuminated wall, and iron shackles were growing from it. A naked girl hung crucified from them, on display like goods in a store. Having mistaken her for a human, Kaito had unfastened her restraints.

Does Hina have memories from back then, from before I turned her on properly?

“Hey...Hina...”

The question on the tip of his tongue, Kaito closed his mouth. She was lightly trembling as she held him in her embrace. Apparently, she hadn’t even noticed the wound on his hand. After thinking for a moment, Kaito wrapped his arms around her. Taking care not to sully her maid uniform, he put strength into them.

Uh...I think I saw a mom and her kid playing like this at a park once, right?

Kaito then grunted and tried to lift Hina up in his arms. However, it was beyond him. She was heavier than he’d expected. As cute as her appearance was, she was metal on the inside after all.

A few silent seconds passed, and Kaito grunted and gathered his strength once more. Hina tilted her head to the side in bewilderment.

“Um, Master Kaito, may I ask what it is you’re trying to do? Wait, I smell blood... Eek, Master Kaito, your wound!”

“Don’t worry; it’s fine. We’ve come this far. Hina, can you, like, do a spin?”

“It is most certainly not fine, it’s... Hmm? If you say so, but a spin?”

Hina moved her feet to match the way Kaito was tilting his body. The two of them spun. As they did, Kaito tilted his body even more. Hina frantically shifted

her feet.

They spun, and they spun, and eventually began energetically twirling atop the stone floor. The hem of Hina's maid outfit gently swayed. Rapidly blinking her emerald eyes, Hina held Kaito tight so as not to let him go as she followed his lead and shifted her feet even faster. Before long, the centrifugal force was lifting Kaito off the ground.

Supported by Hina, he spun around in her arms.

"No, no, Hina, the other way around! I wanted to do this to you!"

"Pardon me? But Master Kaito, forgive me for saying this, but I feel that lifting an automaton body would be difficult, given your physical strength... Ah, but this is really quite fun. It makes my gears feel all warm and fuzzy—eek!"

"Hwah!"

Kaito had tried to recover by putting down his feet, and the two of them teetered over as a result. Hina maneuvered her body under his to break his fall.

The two of them collapsed on the stone floor.

"M-my bad! Hina, are you okay?"

"Yes, very... As a matter of fact, this situation is rather lucrative for me."

With an ecstatic expression, Hina hugged Kaito to her ample bosom. It was a rather problematic position, and he squirmed to get free. He couldn't exactly just stay surrounded by that marshmallow-like softness.

Kaito quickly made his escape. Pretending not to notice how regretful Hina's expression was after they parted, he collapsed to the floor next to her.

The floor was cold and hard, but the two of them reclined as though they were lying on a bed of flowers.

Amid the orange light shining down upon them, Kaito murmured briefly.

"Is the fear all gone now?"

"Master Kaito..."

"I saw a kid playing like that at a park once a long time ago. The kid was crying, and their mom picked them up and spun them around and around."

“Around and around?”

“I didn’t really understand what I was watching at the time. It didn’t really click. But now, I understand that it’s for times like these. So I thought I’d try it out.”

“...”

“Well, if you’re not afraid anymore, then I guess it worked.”

“...”

“Hina? Can you hear me? Did it not work?”

“Oh, I can’t take it anymore! I love you so muuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuch!”

Suddenly, Hina let out a shout. Kaito lay there, surprised, and she covered her face and rolled and rolled and rolled far away from him. Then she bonked into the wall of the room.

As Kaito silently wondered what he should do, she came rolling and rolling and rolling back, her face still buried in her hands.

“I’m not totally following what you’re doing, but welcome back.”

“What am I going to do if you make me wuv you any more, Mashter Kaito...? I weally, weally can’t take it anymore...! Shomebody shave me...!”

“Hina, you’re slurring your words a bit.”

“I wuv you sho, sho mush I can’t even talk...! My shinsherest apologiesh...! Tee-hee.”

Still covering her face, Hina curled up into a ball and rocked from side to side. After trembling from lovesickness for a little longer, she quickly stopped.

Remaining curled up, she murmured.

“I told you, Master Kaito. I told you that I’d eventually explain why I chose you, why it couldn’t have been anyone else.”

“...Yeah, you did say that.”

“To put it all into words would take a week. However, allow me to tell you about the beginning of the beginning. Before you turned me on, before you

established my settings... Even in my base state, I could perceive the outside world.”

Kaito nodded, his suspicions affirmed. It had seemed like she was able to tell what had been going on around her, even when she seemed dormant. She hadn’t been turned on at the time, but it was impossible to tell how active the consciousness born within her gears was from the outside.



“However, while I could obtain information, I was unable to feel, nor was I able to think. When I was brought into the world, and when I watched those around me get activated and dispassionately serve their masters, I could do nothing... Do you remember the automaton maids that were with Vlad? They were not furnished with the start-up setting wherein one out of the four options—‘parent and child,’ ‘siblings,’ ‘master and servant,’ or ‘lovers’—is selected. They were designed to serve as servants...and I was designed to be presented to others.”

“...Presented to others.”

“A twisted gift Vlad enjoyed giving his guests. For those he wasn’t fond of, he would give us to them without telling them the correct answer, and to those that he was, he would tell them the answer and give us to them as toys. The girls who were successfully gifted met miserable fates. When I was at that man’s estate, I saw dolls who had three extra breasts added and genitals installed in their cheeks yet still smiled and served their masters as their lovers.”

“That’s messed up...”

“At that time, I was unable to think. All I did was silently perceive. However, due to the start of the battle between Vlad and the Torture Princess, I was not gifted to anybody and instead was set so as to not freely activate and then stashed away in a storehouse. One day, though, I found myself frivolously transported from the castle’s storehouse to Lady Elisabeth’s Treasury. Then I stayed there...and ages and ages passed. At some point, even the renewal period for the temporary master I had been assigned so that I wouldn’t disobey him, Vlad, lapsed, and I returned to a clean slate. And just when I realized that nobody was ever going to come there, you arrived.”

“I did?”

“You did.”

Hina nodded deeply. She closed her eyes, as if thinking back to that time.

“I sensed your warmth and felt your gaze upon me. But instead of rudely appraising me or inspecting me, you simply called out and asked if I was okay and then unfastened my restraints.”

“I mean...that was because I thought you were a human.”

“Among all the people I knew, not one of them would have saved a bound girl who they knew nothing about. When they’re initially activated, most dolls are filled with rage—the rage of having their tranquility shattered and being made to yield. Unless they receive orders, they will abide by their rage and destroy everything in their path. And I, being no exception, attacked you. However, when I found myself bound from head to toe and determined that I was at a loss, I thought fervently to myself that I wanted it to be you.”

Kaito thought back to that time. The doll, affixed to the Ducking Stool, had looked at Kaito. She had focused her emerald-green eyes directly on him, as if imploring him.

“...That was the first powerful urge that ever sprouted within me. You had released me to no personal gain, and you saved me from being demolished even though I nearly killed you. That was when I decided that I wanted it to be you. You were different, so I wanted it to be you. If I were to serve, if I were to be granted feelings, then it would be unthinkable for it not to be under you. Even after you formally decided for me to be your lover, I never doubted those powerful feelings I felt then.”

“Hina...”

“Allow me to say something arrogant: You are a man well deserving of my love.”

Hina opened her eyes and then turned to her side. Her cheek made gentle contact with the stone floor, and her emerald eyes glowed as she turned to face Kaito. The love in her expression was as real as could be.

She then reached out a hand and gently enveloped his blood-soaked palm.

“Oh, how terribly wounded you are. Even so, you understand the pain of others. You are full of fear, yet you still hold others precious to you, and you still try to treat people with kindness. And amid the deep rage and despair we find ourselves in, you still hold a heart that values our daily routine.”

“...”

“When I watch you trying to preserve kindness and warmth despite knowing

the madness and terrors of the world...what reason would I have not to love you? You say that you have given me nothing and that you are nothing more than a man, but that is hardly the case. I have received so, so many things from you. So many wonderful things.”

Tears began spilling out from the corners of Hina’s emerald eyes. They fell to the floor, glittering in the golden twilight. As her teardrops scattered against the stone floor, Hina gently smiled.

“Do you know how much joy preparing food every day brought me? Do you understand how blessed I felt at cleaning the grounds, at laughing together with Lady Elisabeth, at hearing her compliment my cooking, at greeting you, at working alongside you, and at being able to tell you about my love for you?”

“Hina...all that made me happy, too. Before I came here, I’d never experienced anything like it. Even after seeing all the terrible things the demons did and getting mixed up in those gruesome battles...even then I was happy. Ever since I came here, I got to experience so many things for the first time.”

Spurred on by Hina’s words, Kaito thought back to his old life. His days back then had been filled with nothing but pain and despair. With his broken ribs and twisted body, he’d moaned every time he lay down on his tatami mat. He hadn’t even had the strength to shoo away the flies that would gather above his eyes.

Hina gently combed back his bangs and stroked his forehead as though to console him for those days he’d left far behind. She smiled through her tears. It was a warm, kind, affirming smile.

“...It looks like we’re a perfect match, aren’t we, Master Kaito? You are a man of tremendous value. That kindness you possess that you managed to maintain despite all your sorrow is like a diamond in the mud. It is impossible for me not to love you. And I don’t want to lose you.”

Hina squeezed Kaito’s hand in hers. He could clearly make out the strong feelings in her grasp.

“Hina...”

Kaito understood whether he wanted to or not. She had noticed something.

Even if she didn't know the specifics, she had probably sensed what he was thinking and planning.

Tears pouring from her eyes, she tried to stop him.

"...Master Kaito, I cannot say that I know what you're thinking. But please, please...I beg of you..."

Hina made a vague plea. Still feeling the warmth of her hand, Kaito closed his eyes. He thought back to everything that had happened up until then.

He thought back to Elisabeth punching the table and tearfully proclaiming that Kaito's cooking was vile. To Hina, bringing out new food with a troubled smile on her face. To Elisabeth, rejoicing with such vigor it seemed like cat ears would sprout atop her head. To Hina, gently watching over her.

He thought back to the conversations the three of them had shared and to the peaceful days they'd spent despite how twisted their situation had been.

He was on the verge of losing all that.

He was going to lose it in a manner as cruel as the way all the powerless people who'd been killed by the demons up until then had lost their peaceful lives.

"I'm sorry...but I refuse to give this up."

Kaito murmured softly and then opened his eyes and shook off Hina's hand. She looked shocked. However, he quickly reached his arms back out. Still lying on the ground, he tightly embraced her.

It was the first time he'd ever properly reached out and hugged her.

Blood seeped into her maid uniform, but he ignored that. He put strength into his arms, the way someone would hug a sister, a child, a lover.

Hina's face went pink, and she began flapping her mouth open and closed. Before she could say anything, Kaito whispered to her.

"Sorry, Hina... Even though you think so highly of me, I might become someone different than the person you love."

"Master Kaito, what are you—?"

“Please just hear me out. I can’t tell you the specifics. But I might change. But even if I do, there’s one thing I need you to believe. I want to protect this life of ours. I want to protect this life that you and I love so much. I can’t stay powerless anymore. I want to protect you and Elisabeth. No, I *will* protect you. That’s all. So even if I become completely different... If even then...”

Kaito licked his lips. It scared him to put it into words. Up until then, he’d always lived life on his own. And he didn’t even know if such a thing was permissible. Maybe it wasn’t right to even ask. But even with those thoughts running through his mind, he squeezed the words out of his throat.

“...If even then you still love me, then please fight by my side.”

“Master Kaito...”

“You said that no matter what happened, you would stand in the way of all my enemies. And you told me that if I thought anything of you, that I should tell you either to protect me or to fight together by my side... If you don’t mind me taking you up on that, if you don’t mind me believing in you, then I’ll do everything in my power to live up to those feelings of yours...and if you don’t think that I’m worthy of your love anymore after I’ve changed, then so be it. But even if that happens, there’s one thing I want you to remember.”

As he continued speaking ambiguously, he put more strength into his arms. He couldn’t tell her the specifics. If he told her what he was planning on doing, she’d probably try desperately to stop him. That was precisely why he was keeping his intentions hidden as he hugged and conveyed his heartfelt feelings to her.

“I love you. Please never doubt that.”

“Master Kaito...”

“I love you, Hina... Ah, I see. So this is what love is like.”

Kaito laughed foolishly. He rested his chin on Hina’s shoulder. Tears began leaking from the corners of his eyes. He spoke in a voice tinged with happiness and sadness.

“You know, I never expected to fall in love after I died.”

Hina quietly trembled as she hugged him.

She whispered gently back to him, as though they were exchanging wedding vows.

“No matter what kind of person you become, you will always be my dearest, my darling, my destined one, my master, my one true love, and my eternal companion. And I shall always be yours. No matter what kind of life awaits me, I don’t mind... So if you must fight, then I beg of you, call upon me. I shall accompany you to the depths of Hell.”

“...Thank you, Hina.”

The two of them silently embraced each other atop the stone floor.

That was how spent their peaceful moments together.

The twilight faded, its golden light swallowed up by the darkness of night. The wind carried a slight chill as the moon ascended into the sky. Eventually, Kaito slowly rose to his feet and began walking away from Hina.

He didn’t turn to look back. Understanding, Hina didn’t call out to stop him.

He left the throne room alone. After descending the stairs, he made his way down the hallway.

After reaching the bedroom, he paused for a moment, unsure of whether or not to knock, and then opened the door a hair. He could hear two people sleeping within. He slid into the room to check up on them, being careful not to make a sound.

It appeared that the Butcher had dozed off. His face was as hidden as always, but Kaito could make out strands of drool dripping onto the sheets from within the man’s hood. Kaito wiped away a little of the saliva. The Butcher mumbled something or other.

“Eh-heh-heh, I’m afraid I can’t eat any more. Oh, but if you insist, then three tarts for me.”

“Man, you really do have nerves of steel, don’t you?”

After muttering earnestly, Kaito turned his gaze to Elisabeth. Illuminated by the moonlight, her face had a sort of otherworldly beauty to it. After staring for

a moment, he whispered to her.

“You’re probably going to be livid. But I’ve made up my mind, Elisabeth.”

“...”

“See you later. When you wake up, I’ll make you some *purin*.”

No response came from Elisabeth who was still in a deathlike slumber. Kaito reached out to stroke her cheek and then stopped himself midway and grasped his hand tightly.

He instead gave her a light wave and then left the bedroom with silent footsteps.

“Sweet dreams, Elisabeth.”

After murmuring as though he were calling out to a child, Kaito shut the door. As he basked in the light shining down from the skylight, he took a deep breath and then exhaled.

He walked through the hallway and then made his way down the stairs to the basement.

When he reached the underground passageways, he reviewed his mental map before advancing deeper and deeper into the complex corridors. Upon reaching the empty room and the edge of his memory’s range, he stuck his hand in his pocket.

He grabbed onto the transparent stone with his bloodstained hand.

Its azure rose was already in full bloom.

Suddenly, the stone emitted heat, enough that it felt like it would sear his skin. Black feathers danced before Kaito’s eyes. Azure petals swirled as well, and together they blanketed the room. An overwhelming amount of black and blue flooded his vision.

A bloody animal’s scent came in from somewhere. A strange wind whirled, feeding the feathers and flowers to the surrounding darkness.

A single man stood in their wake.

He sat upon a seat of beast bones, and he whispered as if he knew everything.

“Well then, have you decided?”

“Yeah, I’ve decided all right.”

Their exchange was concise, as though they were close friends.

Then Kaito Sena made his declaration to Vlad Le Fanu.

“I’m going to form a contract with the Kaiser.”

The words he spoke were absurdly foolish and far too reckless.

This was also the only method he had come up with to overturn this situation.

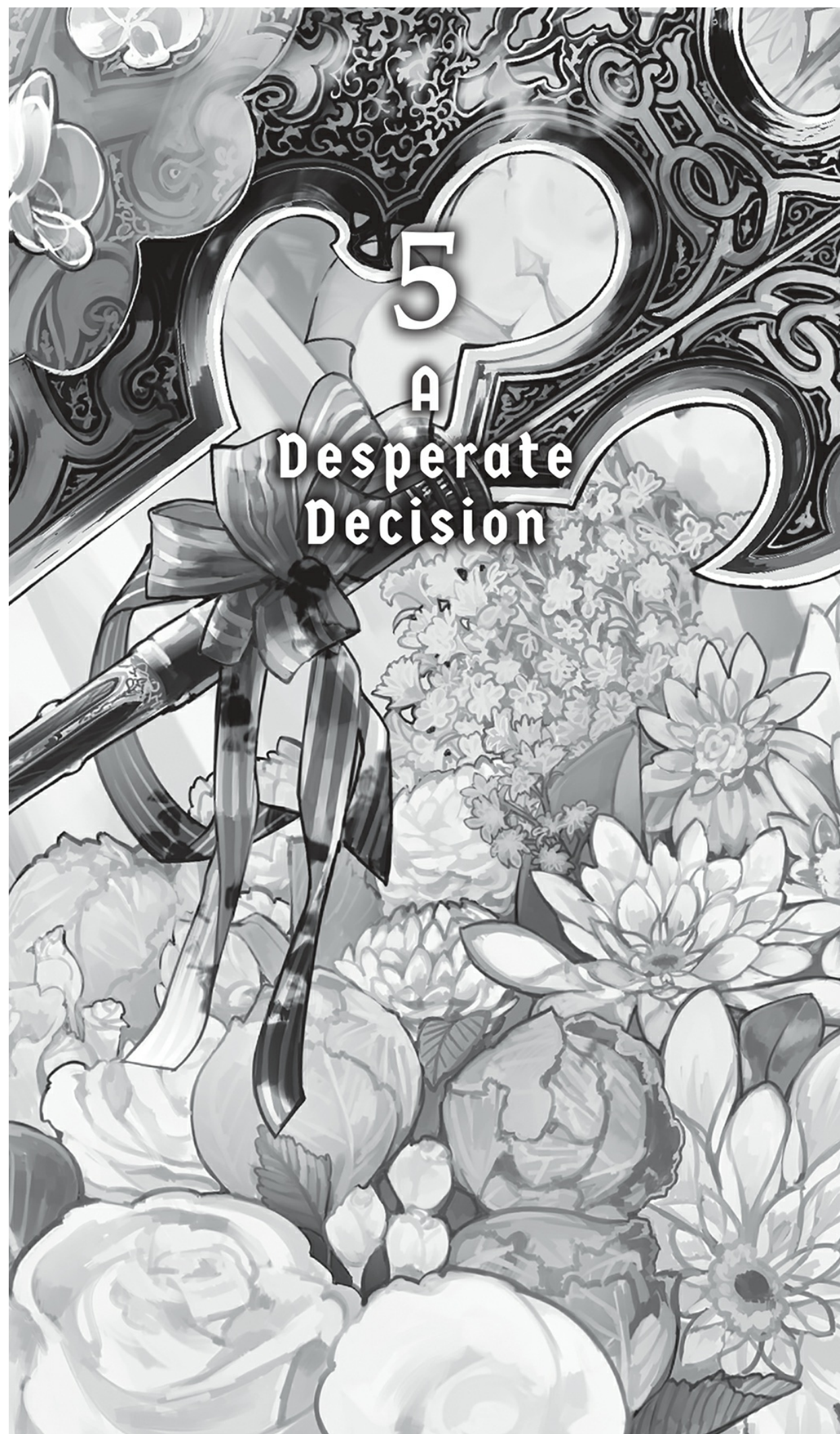
Vlad Le Fannu



The creator of the Torture Princess. Elisabeth's self-proclaimed father. Although he's made a contract with the Kaiser, a massive black dog, he hasn't fused with him and has instead chosen to preserve his own body.

Vlad Le Fannu





F r e a m d T o r k u r c h e n

5

A Desperate Decision

Kaito and Vlad exchanged silent gazes. Vlad's expression was filled with unmitigated glee. He slowly narrowed his crimson eyes and then gave a faint nod and stood up.

He snapped his fingers, and the chair made of beast bones disappeared. The stone room was empty once more.

He then looked at Kaito, checking him over from head to toe.

Suddenly, his beautiful expression crumpled and was replaced by a wicked smile.

"I see, how splendid. Then I take this to mean that you've finally worked up the resolve to join the side that takes from others?"

"Nope, nuh-uh. Not even a little bit," Kaito responded indifferently. Vlad's eyebrows twitched.

A few seconds of silence passed.

Vlad's expression screamed that this development was far outside his expectations. However, Kaito received his gaze coolly. Vlad crossed his arms and then began speaking in a displeased voice.

"You've already passed the first ordeal. Congratulations, you've graduated from being offal. The Kaiser has acknowledged you as a candidate for forming a contract. I call it a trial, but back then, there was a considerable chance that you would simply be devoured. After all, he is a beast who could test a thousand men and then devour all of them. Delightfully, you managed to meet my expectations and catch his eye. And yet..."

"Yeah, I more or less figured. It would have honestly been more of a surprise

for you to put a *safe* contract in front of me.”

“And yet while you wish to form a contract, you say you have no intention of coming to our side and taking from others. What exactly are you thinking? If your desire is shallow, it will eventually swallow you whole. If you don’t possess the capability to wear the tyrant’s mantle as though you were born to do so, the odds you’d even be able to make a contract are low.”

“Yeah, I don’t doubt it. But even after I make a contract with a demon, I don’t plan on tyrannizing people. That’s one thing I’m not going to budge on.”

Kaito obstinately shook his head. Doing that would make him sink to the level of his father, who had abused him throughout his life. And he had no intentions of joining ranks with the spider who ate Neue. There had been a time where he’d wanted to carry out his revenge, even if it meant joining the side that tormented others. But now that the spell his father had put him under had been broken, that choice was no longer available to him. Kaito had no plans to forgive those who tyrannized others, even if that person was himself.

Vlad frowned upon hearing his words.

“Demons seek the pain of men and turn it into power. How do you intend to fight the Grand King without the will to take from others? If all you do is form the contract, you will remain baggage. Do you mean to say that it’s possible to face off against demons, hurling stones at them without getting your hands dirty?”

“Damn right. I had this idea, see— Will you hear me out?”

Then Kaito began telling Vlad about the method he’d thought up.

Vlad silently listened to Kaito’s explanation and then eventually twisted his lips in amusement and exasperatedly looked up at the ceiling. A mixed light burned in his eyes, one that suggested that he was both displeased and highly intrigued.

Once he was finished explaining, Kaito asked Vlad about his plan’s viability.

“...And that was pretty much what I was thinking. Would that work?”

“It is possible, but it’s a plan utterly devoid of sanity from the moment of

conception. I never expected you to be such an out-of-the-box, forward-thinking fool. What a foolish, foolish man you are. Hats off to you."

Vlad rubbed his chin as he surveyed Kaito with his crimson eyes.

Kaito returned Vlad's gaze. Seeing the resolve—and thus, in a sense, the madness—in Kaito's determination, Vlad spoke.

"A question, though, if I may?"

"Shoot."

"Why go to such lengths?"

It was a clear, straightforward question. Kaito tilted his head to the side a hair.

Vlad raised his index finger and elaborated on his natural doubts.

"If you wished to flee, you could do so, carrying vast riches along with you. And with a doll to serve as your bodyguard and companion, no less. A man's life is short. It would last you long enough for a rather enjoyable life on the run. In a sense, Elisabeth brought this on herself. After becoming the Torture Princess and battling demons, being captured by mankind seems an obvious fate for her. And as you hail from another world, the demons' savage acts should have little to do with you. Why, then, would you go to such lengths?"

"Because she's my hero."

Kaito spoke frankly, responding with the answer he himself had reached before. Vlad probably didn't understand the implications of the word *hero*. However, he didn't seek any further explanation.

After all, Kaito's face was filled with undisguised admiration.

At the same time, there was a fact that Kaito came to understand. After all, Elisabeth had saved him out of nothing more than a whim; egoism. At one point, having sensed how irrational that was, there was even a time when Kaito had wished to die again. As a result, he'd told her that if he felt like he was in danger, he'd just go running to the Church and that he had no intention of accompanying her down the road to Hell.

However, even so.

To such an extent that it had made him believe heroes could exist in a world devoid of them...

To such an extent that it had made him feel like God could exist in a world devoid of gods...

Elisabeth had brought about an absurd, lovely miracle.

“For her sake, I’d be willing to meet a fate worse than death. That’s all there is to it.”

That was how much he valued her for granting him, who had known nothing but fear and pain, a new life. In order to save the person who’d given him that, there was something Kaito needed to do.

“For my sake, Elisabeth Le Fanu has to exist. That was what I decided.”

Throughout Elisabeth Le Fanu’s bloody life, she was accompanied by a single foolish servant.

Kaito had promised to live a life that would result in the story going that way. And he couldn’t go back on his word.

“I won’t regret this—no matter how much I may want to, I won’t accept any regrets.”

“To destroy oneself out of admiration, to press deep into the darkness out of hope, and to choose pain in order to fight, hmm. How naive.”

Vlad let out a deep sigh. He shook his head, as if lamenting, and covered his face. His eyes gleamed through the gaps between his fingers and spreading across his face was a smile so unseemly it seemed that his lips would tear.

“Truly, my favorite kind of arrogance.”

Vlad loudly clapped his hands together.

Wind reeking of beasts blew fiercely around them. Thousands of feral howls rang out. They echoed high and low and began forming an orchestral tune.

Azure flower petals and darkness burst forth from between Vlad’s hands. His palms began tearing open, spilling massive amounts of blood onto the floor. Kaito squinted to discern the ichor’s true nature. It wasn’t real blood. This was

Vlad's mana, seeping out from the stone and crawling around by his feet like a living creature as it began tracing an intricate summoning circle. As the wounds on his palms grew so deep that the bones became visible, Vlad's laughter boomed.

“Very well, my dear successor! That tragic resolve of yours! That foolish determination! That mad judgment! Show me just how far they can take you! My body is already dead! Let us bet on whether you will be able to abide by your ideals or whether you will fall and become my true successor! My goodness, this shall be most entertaining, no matter how the die lands!”

His crimson blood changed colors in a flash and went up in an azure blaze. The glyphs on the summoning circle melted together, and the long and short hands of a clock sprang forth from the circle's center and became etched into the floor. However, the two were yet to overlap.

Vlad extended a blood-soaked hand to Kaito. He spoke in a lilting tone, as if inviting Kaito to dance with him.

“Now then, dark magic is accompanied by pain, and the power of demons demands it! Show me the depths of your resolve!”

Kaito gently lifted up his own bloody hand.

The moment he did, the scene from just before flashed back through his mind.

Hina had smiled as she cried and wrapped his wounded hand up in hers.

Kaito clenched his hand shut, reopened it, and murmured.

“Sorry, Hina.”

He then placed his palm atop Vlad's hand.

His left hand was then cleanly chopped off at the wrist.

Huge amounts of blood spurted from the cut. Vlad laughed happily, and Kaito stifled a scream.

The blood, which had poured down on the summoning circle, breathed fresh energy into its magical glyphs. The two clock hands loudly snapped together. The beasts' howls grew louder.

The sound of a door opening rang out from somewhere.

The cell door of something that ought not arrive in the world of man had temporarily been thrown open. An incomparable hound, spurred on by the praises of all the beasts of the world, raced down the path it had once before.

The sound of its indomitable footsteps echoed in Kaito's ears, and its damp breath brushed against his nose.

Vlad released Kaito's hand, and it vanished into the maw of the beast that had appeared from the summoning circle. The first-class hound's sleek black hair glistened as it elegantly forced its body through the air.

A roar that sounded like human laughter rang out.

Geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, fu-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.

A human voice could be heard overlaid in it.

"VLAAA/

The Kaiser's wrathful howl filled the room.

Without a shred of hesitation, the hound opened its jaws toward Vlad Le Fanu, its eyes and mouth burning with hellfire. Its fangs mercilessly skewered his body. But Vlad simply stood there, calmly shrugging his shoulders.

"So sorry, but I no longer have a physical form. Dear Kaiser, surely you knew that this body was nothing more than a phantom, no? Heh—when I think about it like that, perhaps being dead isn't so bad after all."

"Quit flapping your lips, you lowly scrap of meat who went off and died beyond my reach. Your ungainly death has sullied the name of the Kaiser and sullied my pride as a hound. Do you think you are forgiven, Vlad? Do you think that is something I shall forgive, Vlad, O He Who Rears Hell Within His Mind? I listened to the speech you gave when you refused to merge with me, and I approved it. I did not want to sully myself with a lowly human form. However, O Arrogant Mage, know shame for showing me an end such as that!"

"What's done is done, my friend. Would you be so gracious as to give this lecture to the 'me' from before? While I could certainly muster up an apology

even now, I'll be damned if I let you hold me accountable."

"Hey, uh...Vlad...?"

"What is it, my dear successor?"

"...So...the Kaiser can talk?"

Kaito posed the question despite his shock. In the past, Kaito had only ever been able to hear his voice in the roar that sounded like laughter. He'd had no idea that demons could talk like people. However, when he listened closer, those words weren't truly reaching his ears.

The Kaiser's words were simply resonating in Kaito's mind.

"Ah, that he can. Although to be more precise, I should say that he can send words directly into his contractor's mind. Aside from him, the Grand King, the King, the Grand Monarch, and the Monarch can all use human speech as well. Although the Monarch is a bit suspect in that regards."

"That's a surprise... Do demons and humans have similar thought patterns?"

"That isn't it—before they're summoned, they exist in a higher dimension. They don't possess human thoughts, they cannot use speech, and they aren't equipped with senses. When the higher-ranked demons materialize, they reflect their summoner and lower themselves to a point where they can understand each other as simple, evil souls. If they didn't, we humans wouldn't even be able to comprehend their existences."

"...So they use their summoners as reference points to restructure themselves?"

"Indeed. Hence, as I was the one to call forth the Kaiser, I influenced him a great deal. Well, that would explain his pride. However, some of the other unsummoned demons—ones with the power to rival God—could no doubt force all the creatures of our world to understand them without needing to lower themselves and would come already furnished with overbearing intellect and vocabulary... But it will take another two thousand years before any who could summon them will— Oh, careful there."

As Vlad spoke, the Kaiser's jaws made another attempt to gouge his body. His

phantom form wavered for a moment but quickly returned to normal. Vlad shrugged. Even so, the hound's attacks didn't subside.

It appeared that the Kaiser was in a violent tempest of rage.

"Would you be so kind as to give that a rest? Even if my death did cast doubts on your strength, that has little to do with me now... Oh, well, I suppose saying that was just fuel on the fire, wasn't it?"

The Kaiser's fangs dug into Vlad again and again. Kaito thought back to how Vlad and the Kaiser had been defeated.

The Kaiser had been powerful enough to completely overwhelm Elisabeth and Hina. But due to the death of his contractor, Vlad, the Kaiser lost his anchor to this world and subsequently vanished. *"He has his pride as a first-rate hound to consider,"* Vlad had once said. Vlad's death had no doubt made a mockery of the Kaiser.

"Unforgivable, unforgivable, unforgivable! What an unforgivable, puny creature you are! I shan't forgive you for this, Vlad!"

The Kaiser was mad with rage. But after learning that his command of the human language was solid, some of Kaito's tension had faded away. Even if the Kaiser was a demon, at least he could communicate his intentions.

As if having read his mind, the Kaiser lifted his head and looked at Kaito. His gaze—that of a creature on a whole different level than the rest of the hideous, unseemly demons—pierced through him.

Assailed by a strong aura of "death," Kaito's stomach dropped.

The Kaiser narrowed his eyes and then spoke in a low voice.

"Ah, the one I let grab my tail. You possess a false body. So your blood is that of a witch, and your heart is that of a man? Your soul is worthless—and yet intriguing. Very intriguing. Its form is warped. Very well, you will do. Yes, you will do nicely."

"Won't he, Kaiser? I thought he might catch your eye, given your repulsive taste."

Vlad spoke jubilantly, practically singing. He walked along the black dog's

flank and then placed a phantasmal hand atop Kaito's shoulder. Gracefully presenting Kaito, he urged the Kaiser on.

"Now then, shall we get on with the ceremonial trial?"

The black dog offered no reply, simply expelling air through his nose.

In the next moment, the Kaiser bore down on Kaito, his movements possessing an efficiency that bordered on beauty. Although it was filled with azure flames, his gaping maw smelled surprisingly like that of an ordinary dog.

...Huh?

Then the black dog's jaws crunched mercilessly down on Kaito.



It hurts.

It hurts so much.

The pain was the only thing occupying Kaito's thoughts. The black dog's jaws had bitten off the bottom half of his body.

Vlad was standing overhead and saying something in a bewildered tone.

"Well now, this is unfortunate. Did he fail to meet your interest? Even so, doing that out of the blue was a bit ruthless... My, my, I didn't expect him to die in such a manner before even getting started. How disappointing."

Kaito was twitching and convulsing at Vlad's feet. Each time he did, filth and blood spilled out of his torn entrails and onto the floor. Normally, losing that much blood would be enough to make his soul fade away. However, possibly because he was in the middle of summoning the Kaiser, his soul, which was being used as an intermediary, got caught in the black dog's fur and stopped there.

Terrified due to being trapped halfway between life and death, Kaito tried to scream. However, all the air was leaking out of his abdomen, and he couldn't gather his voice.

"Ah—... Ah—... Ah—..."

"Well, I suppose it can't be helped. This, too, is a valid way for the curtain to

fall. Bets can be won, but tragically, they can be lost as well. He was lacking in both fortune and ability. That was all there was to it."

With affected movements, Vlad shrugged his shoulders. His body was beginning to transform into black feathers and azure flower petals from the toes up. It seemed that he was quickly giving up on the plan of using Kaito's mana to remain in the world. His judgment was as gracious as always. Then Vlad vanished, leaving Kaito without even enough time to beg him to stay.

The black dog, too, turned tail and began making his way back down the path he had come from. The wicked energy that had kept Kaito's soul in place left as the fur it had been wound through faded away.

Kaito's soul began leaving his body along with his blood.

The next moment, instead of a light at the end of a tunnel, Kaito was assailed by an intense vision of the future.

Hina's probably going to find my corpse after this.

Given Elisabeth's current status, it would be impossible for her to summon Kaito's soul again. Hina would apologize to Kaito for making him wait a little bit, assist Elisabeth in fighting the Marquis and the Grand Marquis, and get destroyed. And the Torture Princess, too, would have all the pain the world had to offer bestowed upon her by the Grand King before being brutally killed.

She would die a lonely, solitary death.

The only thing that would go on would be the world of man. All would be well in the name of their God.

That's no good. I can't let that happen. I—!

Kaito didn't want to die helpless like that, not being able to give anything back to the other two.

Awash in despair and his own lamentations, Kaito fainted in agony.

The moment he did, the blood in his body began releasing a strange warmth. His entire body began heating up, as though it were transforming into flame. It was like some sort of magic had gone and activated on its own.

As he was being toyed with by that sensation, Kaito's field of vision went dark.

In the deep darkness, all he had left was the unpleasant pain of the heat within his body.

When he came to his senses, he found himself lying atop a damp tatami mat.

...H-huh?

Flies buzzed noisily over his eyes.

He surveyed his surroundings. A dirty fluorescent bulb was swaying from the ceiling. The cracked window was covered in packing tape, and his ripped-out teeth rolled about beneath the tea table. The bits of his gums stuck to them were raw.

Then Kaito looked at his body. The shirt stuck to his scrawny torso was hardened from all the sweat and vomit staining it. His right arm was covered in shallow lacerations, and his left arm hung unmoving and was covered in dark-red stains. His ankle was twisted at an odd angle and had stuck that way. And it was possible that the pain in his stomach was due to a ruptured organ.

This is...the room I was in when I died back in Japan... Wait, did I do something?

Kaito tilted his head to the side. When he'd been assailed by despair and regret, his blood had released so much heat he'd felt as though it were burning up. He could only conclude that he'd subconsciously activated some sort of magic.

Don't tell me I went back in time?

That was the conjecture Kaito arrived at based on the scene around him and the familiar pain racking his body. Maybe souls had no conception of time. Only bodies, living in reality, were bound by that concept. Maybe his soul, on the verge of fading from the golem body Elisabeth had made, had burned up the remaining mana in its blood and gone backward in time.

Although his brain was addled by pain and malnutrition, that was the conclusion Kaito arrived at.

"In that case...no time to waste, huh?"

He murmured quietly and then forced his body to move. There wasn't so

much as an uninjured hair on him. His body was practically skin and bones. Simply breathing sent waves of pain washing over his body. He also couldn't stop convulsing, possibly as a result of dehydration. But none of that mattered to him. He wriggled, his body having become little more than a ball of pain.

He had to hurry up and get back to the other world.

I'm going to save them. This time, I'll make sure I do whatever I can.

Limping on his broken leg, he struggled forward. He made for the ashtray covered in cigarette butts, the same one that had been used to smash his cheek a few days back.

He then threw it at the window so hard he almost dislocated his shoulder.

The conveniently cracked glass made a loud noise as it shattered.

"Urgh, ack, blurgh."

The shock had sent his body reeling, and he retched where he stood. However, the contents of his gut were minimal. Tears welled up in his eyes at the unpleasant convulsions that struck his empty stomach. In spite of that, he crawled forward, propelled by willpower alone.

His father would be coming home soon. And when night fell, he would strangle Kaito to death. However, Kaito didn't have time to wait for that. He had to get this over with as quickly as possible.

"I gotta hurry, I gotta hurry, I gotta hurry up and get going... I gotta hurry."

With shaking fingers, Kaito grabbed a large shard of glass. It sliced his palm, but he barely felt any pain.

The thought of Elisabeth and Hina getting brutally murdered was far more terrifying. More than anything, he wanted to spend as little time as possible in this place far away from them.

Even if I end up not being able to do anything, I still want to be by their sides.

Elisabeth was the person he admired. Hina was the woman he loved.

And he had met both of them for the first time after he died.

This world didn't have a single person in it who would call out his name with

affection.

Then he heard the front door open. That man had returned earlier than usual, possibly related to the fact that Kaito had smashed the glass. His father was running violently down the hallway. He opened the sliding door and was about to shout out something in anger, when, due to how unexpected the scene before him was, he displayed an unusually flabbergasted expression.

“Kaito, you little shit, what’re you doin’?”

“Escaping to another world.”

After answering frankly, Kaito pressed the shard of glass against the nape of his neck.

In the space of a breath, he severed his carotid artery. Blood gushed out, and the ceiling was dyed bright red.

As the heat gradually left his body and a chill ran through him—a decidedly different sensation compared to the warmth of blood loss he’d felt earlier, and one that filled him with a vivid sense of loss—Kaito finally realized a certain possibility.

Huh? Wait, all that stuff that happened up till now...that wasn’t just a dream, was it?

At that point, his thoughts came to an abrupt halt.

Kaito Sena’s one and only life had ended.

Normally, someone who was killed as meaninglessly as a worm in a death most pitiful, unseemly, cruel, and gruesome wouldn’t get a second shot at life. It would be ridiculous for anyone to expect to be able to go to the world of their choice after they died.

In short, the conclusion was simple. There was no such thing as miracles.

That was all there was to it.



When he came to his senses, Kaito found himself floating in the darkness.

He had no body. All that existed was his consciousness. In fact, he couldn’t

even say for sure whether or not even that existed.

They say “I think, therefore I am,” but in a meaningless space with no sense of touch, sight, or hearing, it was difficult to say that the presence of self-consciousness alone was enough to prove one’s existence. There was nobody there to observe him. No one was there to touch him or define him. There was nothing there that he could use to confirm his own sensations.

That fact was an extremely cruel one.

Just how long am I going to be here?

Kaito thought this to himself. Even the passage of time here was ambiguous. He was unable to suppress the sense of curiosity as to how his consciousness hadn’t vanished despite his brain being gone. All he was doing was idly existing.

I guess this is probably the afterlife.

Kaito was familiar with the concepts of Heaven and Hell. He’d concluded that he and Elisabeth were both probably headed for the latter. However, he hadn’t suspected that its true nature would turn out to be like this.

The fact that humanity had yet to obtain information about the afterlife was, in a word, obvious.

And the harshest part about being in that darkness was the fact that he had no definite memories that he could cling to.

In a place like that, where everything was vague, the only thing that could be relied upon was one’s own consciousness and memories. However, Kaito didn’t even have faith in those.

Are the memories I have of the time I spent with Elisabeth and the rest in that world even real?

Or were they nothing more than a fabrication Kaito had conjured up to escape the pain?

At this point, there was nothing he could use to verify them. They might have been nothing more than an incredibly realistic daydream. Given the way Kaito was now trapped in the afterlife, that possibility seemed the most likely.

Kaito had wallowed in his fabrications and then had eventually lost sight of

the line separating them from reality and killed himself.

If that were the case, then Kaito Sena's life would truly have been beyond salvation.

There could probably be no greater sadness.

Eventually, even the time he spent despairing passed.

Surrounded by darkness that continued on forever, Kaito sank deeper and deeper within himself. Searching for salvation, he rummaged through his memories, checked them, and then, on the verge of descending into madness, he arrived at a certain state of mind.

He was incredibly pissed off.

Hold up a minute. I mean, hypothetically, even if that world was false...

Did that really mean that it had no meaning?

Throughout all seventeen years of Kaito Sena's life, his memories of that world were the only ones with vivid colors.

In that place, even if it had been a figment of his imagination, the experiences he'd accumulated had brought about undeniable change within him.

Enough of a change that he could muster up rage, even when in the midst of such irrationality.

Am I really fine with just staying here, wallowing in regret? Was my whole life really worthless to the very end? And before that, did all of it really just revert to zero?

Amid the darkness, Kaito violently forced the cogwheels of his nonexistent brain into motion. His recollections of that world stirred. Terrible, horrible memories that contained within them a single spoonful of radiant brilliance. They jump-started Kaito's spirit. There was no way that he could think of those memories as meaningless, after all.

Wasn't this situation trying too hard to get me to think that all was a dream, a fabrication that never really happened?

That was right—for what it was, it had all lined up too well. Kaito began

noticing the incongruities in the recent developments, all of which had practically whispered in his ear that his memories were false and that he should fall into despair.

That's right. I've got a hunch that someone's trying to get me to feel regret.

They had tried to get him to spend all his time crying. To spend the rest of his days in endless despair. But Kaito wasn't about to have that.

At first, he had definitely despaired.

Kaito had spent a few hours, a few years—at worst, perhaps even a century—within his mind on the verge of madness. However, little by little, he had regained his composure.

Even if that world had been a lie...

“No matter what kind of person you become, you will always be my dearest, my darling, my destined one, my master, my one true love, and my eternal companion. And I shall always be yours.”

“You fool... You utter imbecile... You had the fortune of obtaining a second life... Just stop already. It's...fine. You've done enough.”

...the memories he'd made there had still been beautiful, and the things he'd experienced there had been real.

Even if it had been fake, the fact that there had been someone who cared for Kaito was real.

And the fact that, in a world devoid of heroes and gods, there had been a woman he had been able to believe in was true as well.

If that's the case, then there's no need for me to grieve, right? Depending on the situation, if someone really set this up, then I don't have to waste time feeling sorry for myself.

From within the darkness, Kaito picked up on incongruities over and over again.

That place was unnecessarily dreadful. It was like the personification of the situation Kaito feared the most—that he'd never actually gone to that other world and just cruelly died at the end of his abuse. The darkness had silently

imposed anguish upon him and tried to render his precious memories meaningless again and again.

Something about it was strange. As such, he had to confirm it.

Even though he lacked feet to walk with, a body, a soul.

Even if this isn't something that someone set up.

As long as he didn't give up, he might eventually be able to discern the truth.

Kaito was there, after all.

That entire line of thinking had been absurd. It had no logical basis to it. But despite knowing that, it was the conclusion Kaito had arrived at. As he did, he slowly began speaking.

"I don't care if it's a fabrication. That's the conclusion I reached. I'm gonna keep trying to pin down the source of these incongruities. As long as I have my memories, I'm never giving up, and I'm never gonna lose myself."

His mouth shouldn't have existed, yet his voice came out all the same. Furthermore, he now clearly sensed another entity. As though a fog had lifted, Kaito's perception grew rapidly.

There was something standing before him.

Kaito faced it and then spoke his thoughts freely.

"Hey, could you *cut it out* already? Even if you keep this up, nothing's gonna change. No matter how much time passes, *I'll always know I'm being tested.*"

Suddenly, Kaito felt a sharp pain run across his body. The nostalgic sensation traced the contour of his body, formed it, and bound him.

When he came to his senses, he found himself impaled by a number of dog fang-like wedges. Chains extended from them, fixing his body in place. He was dangling in the air, held up by a thousand chains.

If he took so much as a step, he didn't doubt that his body would be torn open and his blood would run freely.

A boy stood before him.

The red-haired boy gazed directly at Kaito. His gaze seemed to ask if Kaito was

really okay with this, as well as reproach him, as the boy knew he was in the wrong.

For a second, Kaito was assailed by a sensation resembling vertigo.

Had that boy really existed? Had he really wished for Kaito's happiness?

Even now, he wasn't certain. Still, though, he faced the boy and smiled.

"It's okay, Neue. I'm just protecting the things that I want to protect."

Kaito shifted his body. The chains rattled, and blood trickled down. The wedges dug into him, tearing his flesh. His arms ripped apart as he extended a hand forward, and his legs were severed as he began to walk.

As he did—insane as his actions were—he made his promise in a bright, cheery voice.

"I'll make sure to protect the promise I made with you, as well."

As his body tore, Kaito extended his hand toward hope.

Then, in the deep darkness, he grabbed on to a black dog's tail.



Geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, fu-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.

"Very well, very well, very well, very well! Very well! I have taken a liking to you! Your blind devotion to hope, your madness! Your unnatural familiarity with pain! O glass marble, hurled about and horribly twisted, yet remaining clear all the while! Very well! You possess the capacity to entertain me, to entertain the Kaiser!"

An azure flame roared to life. The black dog kicked at the stone floor with his graceful paws. Each time he leaped, the smell of wild beasts filled the area, and the whole room shook. Vlad's eyes were twinkling, and he laughed as his coat and hair were blown about by the wind.

Before he'd realized it, Kaito was standing back in the room at the end of the underground corridor. His left hand was still gone, and he was covered in blood. Even so, he cast his fierce, antagonistic gaze at the Kaiser.

The summoning circle shined blue atop the floor. Azure flower petals and black feathers danced vigorously through the air, as though giving their blessings. Amid the hymnal-like roar of countless beasts, the Kaiser made his declaration.

“Henceforth, you shall be my master! Kaito Sena! O Accumulation of Seventeen Years’ Pain!”

Then everything went quiet.

With a whiff, everything vanished from the room. The Kaiser, Vlad, and the madly dancing feathers and petals all disappeared.

All that was left was Kaito.

Nothing about the room was different from when he’d entered it. He surveyed its rocky walls in amazement.

It was like it had all been just a bad dream.

That was no dream, though.

Kaito gingerly lifted his left arm. There, at the severed end, sat the massive, pitch-black forepaw of a beast.

He turned his lips up into a faint smile. Then he closed his eyes and inspected the amount of mana within his body.

The power of a demon dwelled deep within his heart. However, it didn’t seem like he’d be able to freely use it just yet. The aggregate sum of all the pain he’d experienced to date was far from sufficient.

What to do next?

Kaito began analyzing the initial plan he’d put forth to Vlad.

It was right when he’d just finished putting that thought in order.

The door shook. Someone was shouting from outside it.

Suddenly, the blade end of a halberd split through its heavy planks. The door shattered, and splinters of wood went flying.

Hina stood on the other side. She’d probably heard something, whether it was Kaito’s screams or the Kaiser’s roars. She shouted out in a tense voice.

“Master Kaito, are you al—?”

“Hina.”

As she heard him say her name, Hina’s eyes went wide and she lost her voice. She stared at him. After checking his left wrist, she grimaced faintly as though she’d understood something.

Kaito smiled back at her.

...There’s the face I missed.

He had missed her so much and loved her so dearly. With all the trust and affection that he could muster, Kaito stared at Hina as if trying to sear her image into his mind. Then he deliberately opened his mouth.

“If even then you still love me, then please fight by my side.

“You said that no matter what happened, you would stand in the way of all my enemies. And you told me that if I thought anything of you, that I should tell you either to protect me or to fight together by my side... If you don’t mind me taking you up on that, if you don’t mind me believing in you, then I’ll do everything in my power to live up to those feelings of yours...and if you don’t think that I’m worthy of your love anymore after I’ve changed, then so be it. But even if that happens, there’s one thing I want you to remember.

“I love you, Hina... Ah, I see. So this is what love is like.”

Then he met her emerald gaze and asked a question of the woman he’d once professed his love for, the person he’d asked to fight alongside him—his eternal companion, who had then nodded in agreement.

“Hina, could you die for me?”

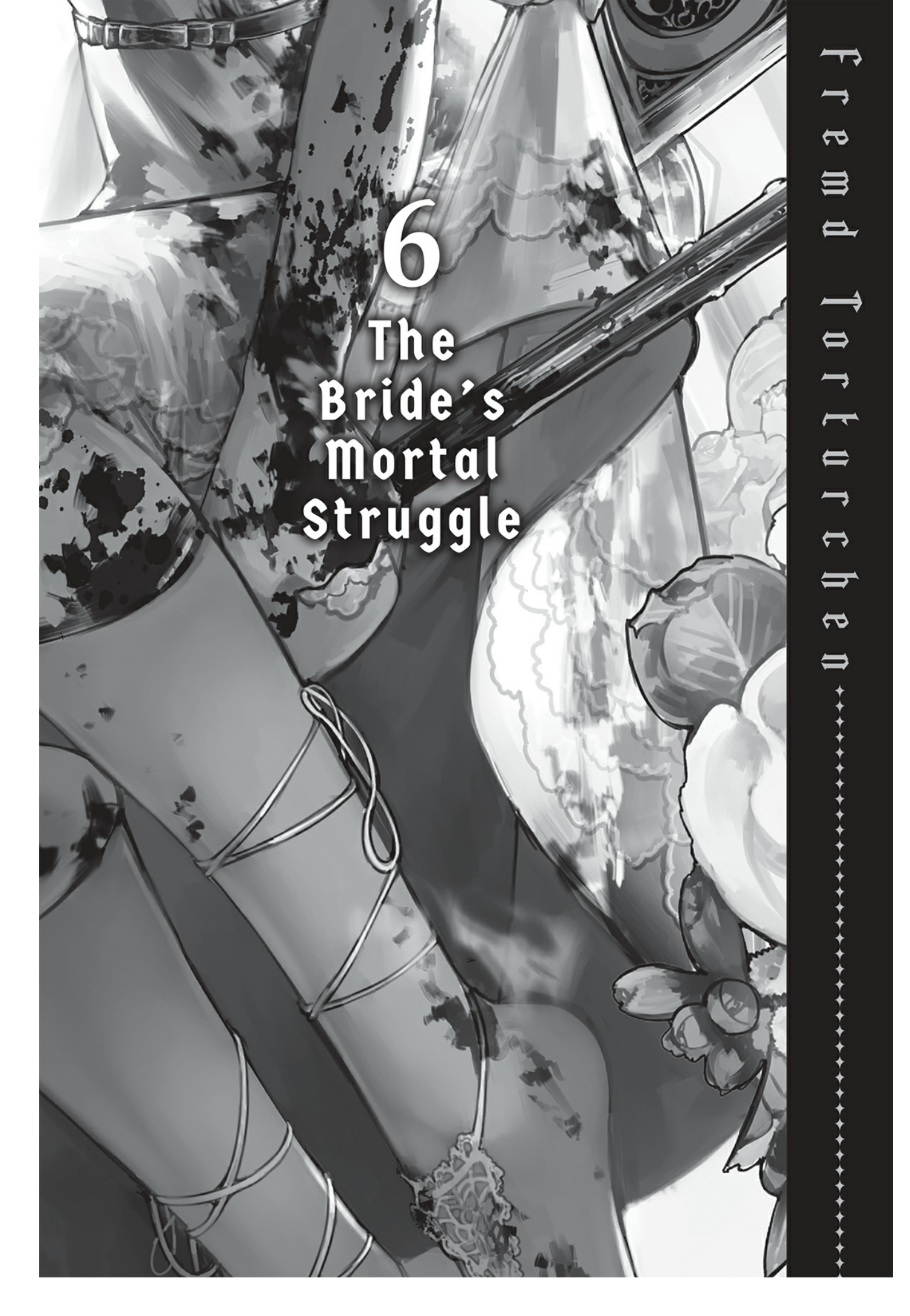
Hina stared back at him. Her face slackened.

A warm smile spread across her face. It was filled with true delight and possessed not a shred of lies or falsehood.

“Yes, gladly.”

Hina answered and then knelt before him.

Kaito simply nodded in response.



6

The Bride's Mortal Struggle

F r e m d T o r k u r c h e n

6

The Bride's Mortal Struggle

A solemn procession wound its way through the deep mountains surrounding Elisabeth's castle, looking like guests bound for a funeral. They knocked down trees and tore up their roots as they went. Familiars made of flesh bound together by barbed wire swung axes with untiring arms, clearing a path for their mistress.

The trees had taken centuries to grow, and now they were being mercilessly chopped down by sullied hands.

Whenever the trees groaned and were about to topple over, a man floating in the air wearing black, cylindrical clothes and a mask modeled after a crow's head breathed fire out from his beak and burned them to ash.

The man's majestic conduct was steeped in dignity. However, the very act of a demon going out of his way to tidy up a path somehow resembled a street performance.

The demon, the Grand Marquis, had a needle shaped like a brain glittering in the nape of his neck, and he worked obediently to serve his mistress. At his feet, the Marquis gasped as he was transported around in an iron birdcage. Each time the familiar shoved the sideways birdcage forward, the Marquis within tumbled about and let out an ear-curdling scream as the skin beneath his bandages was scraped.

Trampling over the bizarrely colored jet-black ash, they made their way forward.

Far behind them, collared underlings were shouldering an extravagant palanquin.

Atop the golden palanquin were an elegant throne and a white wolf's pelt,

and atop the throne sat a beautiful, haughty woman. As she exposed her long legs from beneath her scarlet crinoline dress, the Grand King fanned herself with that crow-feather fan she loved so much. She occasionally let out a yawn as she gracefully rode along.

The way the thousand troops advanced was oddly quiet yet lively.

As ominous as a nightmare yet as flashy as a parade, they made their way toward the mountain peak that the castle rested upon.

Eventually, they made it through the tree line. A barren hill stood beyond the trees' end. Their destination, the fortresslike castle that overlooked the trees in every direction, stood atop its bare rock surface.

The procession's aim was the tightly sealed castle gate and the head of the castle's lord, Elisabeth. However, the procession was beset by an unexpected commotion and the underlings swayed on their feet as they stopped in their tracks.

A bride stood before them.

A beautiful bride who looked like she'd just been plucked from a wedding hall.

The snow-white figure she cast was nonsensically comical, irregular, and out of place.

"...Now whatever might that be?"

The Grand King involuntarily frowned at how bizarre it was. But no matter how many times she double-checked, the figure in front of the castle was still there. The girl wearing a lovely wedding dress was standing in their way like a gatekeeper.

Her silver hair was covered in a delicately embroidered veil. Her beautiful, pale cheeks cast a soft shadow. Her dress was simple yet elegant and made entirely out of white cloth, and her exposed shoulders were adorned with charming flowers. She wore long silk gloves that covered her slender, graceful forearms. And her skirt, which was comprised of many layers of lace, tidily covered her down to her ankles.

She was standing atop the barren hill as though she were waiting for her

bridegroom.

For her to stand like that before a thousand troops seemed downright comical. However, the object she clasped in her dainty fingers in place of a bouquet served to prove that her proper place was, in fact, a battlefield and not a wedding hall.

The bride was carrying a peculiar halberd, one that looked almost like an executioner's ax.

Its matted jet-black metal handle had a tassel made from an animal's tail attached to it, and its massive, vicious blade evoked the image of a carnivore's jaw.

Squinting at the girl's whimsy—for what else could one call a bride who stood upon a battlefield carrying an executioner's ax but whimsical?—the Grand King, driven by curiosity, advanced to the front of her troops, palanquin and all.

As if to greet her, the bride slowly opened her closed eyes.

She fixed her emerald gaze on the embodiment of death, the Grand King, who stood before her.

Recognizing the fierce will burning in her eyes, the Grand King snapped her fan shut.

"I see. I suppose this is no farce or idle whim."

Murmuring softly, the Grand King concluded that the absurdly dressed person before her was, without a doubt, her enemy.

She'd acknowledged that the girl in her wedding dress was fit to stand upon the battlefield, even more so than a knight clad in armor would have been. Without pause, she called out to the bride—Hina—in a quizzical voice.

"Ah, I remember you. You're the young automaton lass, the one who was so fond of that feeble little lover boy, right? What might you be playing at? While you don't seem to have mistaken this for a wedding hall, you seem to be short a bridegroom. Have you come to die alone?"

"Precisely. I have come here to die."

Without a shred of hesitation, Hina flatly returned the Grand King's words.

The Grand King frowned. She twisted her lips and then asked Hina a question from beneath her crow-feather fan's shade.

"You've come to die? On Elisabeth's orders? How tragic it is, you pup, to be used as a sacrificial pawn. And what of your attire? A manifestation of your lingering regrets?"

"Don't make baseless assumptions. Master Kaito was kind enough to fulfill my final wish and prepare this dress for me. It is the manifestation of my will and of my feelings for him. Master Kaito was the one who ordered me to stand here, for he is my beloved and my one and only master."

"For that lover boy?!"

The Grand King's eyes went wide. After a moment, a derisive smile spread across her face. She shook her head and spoke in a voice as though she were consoling a cat.

"How pitiable indeed. I weep for you, girl. Make no mistake, you're being used as a sacrificial pawn. If he told you to stay here, to protect Elisabeth, then he may well have told you to die for the sake of another woman. As a woman myself, I can't help but sympathize with you."

The Grand King commiserated with Hina, her voice full of earnest compassion. However, the corners of her mouth were curved into a wicked, muddy smile. She whispered to Hina with a truly unpleasant expression on her face.

"Say, lass. Elisabeth may have refused to surrender, but would you have any interest in becoming my subordinate? While you aren't as valuable as Elisabeth, the fact remains that you're a rare specimen, a doll of Vlad's creation. I would polish your gears for you every day, so you'd never have to fear rusting. There's no need for you to be used up and ruined by a man such as that."

"Don't you dare mock my groom."

Her rejection rang out needle sharp. One of the Grand King's eyebrows twitched.

Hina swung down her executioner's ax in front of her. It split through the air and kicked up a gale. Leveling her ax's blade toward the Grand King, Hina spoke quietly.

“That kind man told me to die. Do you fail to understand the meaning of that?”

“I’m afraid I do. You were cast aside and told to die. What do you wish to say?”

“After anguishing over it, that man decided to rely on me and entrust me with a grave order. And I understood. It had come from a place of love and trust. Loving me from the bottom of his heart, he finally asked me to fight alongside him. At long last, he included me in his thoughts and his strategies. For that kind, cowardly man to trust me so fully, to think of me so intimately...do you have any idea how great a joy that is?”

She gripped the handle of her ax tightly. Tears devoid of sadness gradually welled up in her emerald eyes. The Grand King grimaced in disgust and shook her head even harder. When she spoke, her tone was exasperated.

“And that’s enough for you to willingly die. Faced with a thousand troops, you plan to throw your life away.”

“Indeed, and with utmost gratification.”

“That’s...a surprise. You...you aren’t sane!”

As she peered into Hina’s burning eyes, the Grand King forgot herself and shouted. Her seductive red lips parted, and her expression was overtaken with shock. She cast her gaze skyward and then continued speaking in bewilderment.

“You’ve gone mad.”

“Very. Didn’t you know, Grand King, love is madness! The day I met Master Kaito, my love for him began driving me mad!”

Hina loudly made her declaration. She swung her ax again, this time to the side. The air split, and a powerful gust rocked the soldiers. The wedding dress’s hem twirled brilliantly.

Her snow-white dress and veil shook as she cried out.

“Now then, demons, come face me! My name is Hina! I am my beloved Master Kaito’s eternal lover, his faithful companion, his soldier, his weapon, his love outlet, his sex doll—and his bride!”

Upon hearing the loud introduction, the Grand King closed her fan and then wordlessly swung it down in front of her.

“Very well—if that is what you say, then I shall have that body of yours trampled.”

In the next moment, a wave of underlings and familiars rushed the bride.

Their countless footfalls rattled the earth, and Hina readied her executioner’s ax and assumed a low stance. As her foes reached her position, she kicked off hard against the ground and plunged into their ranks. She swung her blade sideways, mowing them down by their stomachs. Familiars trampled on the innards, drew swords from the sheaths on their backs, and advanced. The battle had begun. However, the Grand King quickly lost interest.

Amid the clamor, she leaned far back in her throne.

“Hmm... I wonder what that all was about.”

The Grand King stifled a yawn as she muttered listlessly. After all, the bride’s show of courage couldn’t possibly last. Not even automatons could run forever. Given the number of soldiers she faced, the battle was bound to end momentarily. The Grand King shrugged as she made an underling pour her a drink.

She downed the golden goblet full of wine, elegantly passing the time.

A handful of heads flew in front of her, accompanied by fountains of blood. However, she hardly minded losing a few dozen men. She cast a drowsy gaze over the battle unfolding before her.

“She’s giving it her all, isn’t she...?”

Blood sprayed, heads went flying, and severed torsos toppled to the ground. The bride’s dress fluttered. All at once, the underlings and familiars came down upon her like a wave. She broke their formation and forced them back.

No matter how much time passed, the sound of her blade cutting flesh never ceased.

Sensing that something was wrong, the Grand King’s face stiffened.

Something seems off, no?

Something impossible was happening.

Before she'd noticed, a mountain of corpses had piled up in front of the Grand King. A great many bodies had fallen to the ground, and more viscera were heaped up on top of them. Another scream rang out. Another underling's head went flying. The ax loudly whooshed through the air, shaking off blood as it went.

The Grand King's eyes went wide. The golden goblet dropped from her hand. Seeing the person standing atop the mountain of corpses, her voice leaked out.

"This must be a joke...that whelp—"

There stood a fierce Valkyrie, a being who defied all logic.

Her wedding dress stained a deep red, the bride was holding her executioner's ax at the ready.

Her veil was soaked crimson, as though she'd just been caught in a rain of blood. The bloody bride stuck an approaching underling hard in the chest with the handle of her ax, then turned to the side, dodged a familiar's attack with the grace of a dancer, launched herself from the ground again, and rolled into a backward somersault. Her veil traced a gentle arc though the air.

As she landed, she brought her ax blade up and sliced one of her foes clean in two.

Seeing her bloodcurdling movements, the Grand King reflexively clutched her crow-feather fan.

That ax... Is that one of Elisabeth's torture devices? No, that's not it. What is it, then?

The sharpness of the black executioner's ax that Hina wielded was beyond the pale. It was like one of Elisabeth's summoned torture devices. But Elisabeth should have been in a coma. She shouldn't have had nearly the leeway required to make a weapon and give it to the automaton. The Grand King was baffled.

What she was even more amazed by were Hina's movements. The way she was moving in order to kill her opponents had long since passed the realm of praiseworthiness and transcended to the point of being repulsive.

There wasn't so much as the tiniest gap in Hina's defenses. She maintained oversight in every direction, straining her entire body with such force that the blood vessels in a human's brain would've probably burst by now. The speed at which she responded to the varied attacks would normally have been unthinkable.

With efficient movements, she severed the heads of her enemies, tore open their chests, and at times used their corpses as shields as she murdered everything in her path. The only thing that could be felt from her motions was an absolute resolve to kill her foes.

It was then that the Grand King recalled a certain fact.

"Say, Vlad. Your dolls are well crafted, but aren't they a bit dull?"

The words she herself had once said to Vlad flashed back through her ears. His automatons had been generally high functioning, but the range of their emotions was limited. They had been lacking in passion, and their movements generally fell into patterns. As a result, they couldn't be used as anything more than sacrificial pawns.

At times, determination, impulses, and strong emotions—both negative and positive—could grant people unusual amounts of power. The Grand King recalled a man who, despite being an ordinary human, had been able to fell five underlings when he was defending his son. If she were to assume that the automaton, whose abilities were far beyond those of humans, possessed emotions of equal—or perhaps even greater—intensity...

Could love...bring about such a—?

What had been born could not be considered anything as pedestrian as a bride.

She was nothing short of a monster.

"I can do this aall day!"

As she howled, Hina used one leg as a fulcrum to spin around and mow down several more underlings at once. The guts that came flying out of their stomachs sprayed her in the face. As she violently spit out the flesh that had landed in her mouth, she held her executioner's ax firm and punctured the lung

of the underling who had just rushed at her. Maintaining her stance, she dashed forward. She skewered her foes, shattered their bones, and then kicked them to the side as she screamed.

“Send as many as you wish! My love is unbreakable!”

The Grand King shuddered at the impetuous timbre of her voice.

Despite her overwhelmingly desperate situation, the bride truly intended to win.

For the sake of her beloved, for her bridegroom alone, she intended to slay each and every one of her thousand foes.

How can this be? How can it be that I feel afraid?

Realizing that fact filled the Grand King with humiliation.

In that moment, she felt as though she could hear the sound of Vlad’s laughter ringing in her ears. He had been the type of man to enjoy bizarre developments such as this. However, the Grand King was decidedly not. She was a woman who only held affection for herself. She had no love for unexpected turns of events.

Curse you, Vlad! This is all your fault for devising such a bothersome creation!

The Grand King stood. There were still some underlings and familiars remaining, but she couldn’t leave this to them. She resignedly closed her crow-feather fan and then swung it down as though carrying out an execution.

From atop her palanquin, she gave orders to the two that she’d been holding in reserve.

“Marquis, Grand Marquis—go forth.”

The black cylinder of a man slowly nodded. As he did, the rolling birdcage’s door opened, and the Marquis came tumbling out. He let out shrill yells.

“Damn you, you bitch, you whore-ore-ore, oh yes, Your Majesty the Grand King, at oooooooooonce!”

The Grand King ground her teeth. While the Marquis was under her strong control, he was more or less unable to use his mind-controlling abilities. But if

she loosened her leash on him, even just a little, the odds were high that he'd immediately turn on her.

At any rate, I doubt mind control would have much effect on an automaton.

Having reached that conclusion, the Grand King left her brainwashing intact as she sent the two after the bride.

The Grand Marquis ascended buoyantly into the air, rising above the ranks of the underlings and familiars. He opened his crow's beak wide and then spewed black flames from it, catching his subordinates in the blaze as well.

"—Hiyah!"

In a flash, Hina raised her executioner's ax as high in the air as it would go and then brought it down upon the earth. The ground swelled wherever the shock wave passed, flinging the corpses of her foes high into the air. The corpses formed a barrier and took the billowing flames head-on. For a second, the charred mass of black ash blotted out the Grand Marquis's vision. Slicing it in twain vertically, the bride rushed forward.

Beneath her bloodstained veil, her eyes glittered with an animalistic light. With a fierce battle cry, she leveled a diagonal slash at the Grand Marquis.

"Now I have you—!"

"True, if your foe was the Grand Marquis alone, you might have been able to land a blow."

The Grand King spoke sweetly. As she did, a black shadow appeared beneath Hina.

The Marquis, who had been crawling along the ground in agony, slammed his limbs into the earth. He leaped into the air like a cricket, with power and height no human would have been able to muster.

Hina was raising her ax high, and he launched into her defenseless stomach like a bullet.

She took the hit directly, and her body bent at a sharp angle.

"—Gah—!"

A graceful smile found its way to the Grand King's face, and she covered her mouth with her fan as she made her vulgar remarks. As she did, Hina snorted and laughed at her.

"Ha, you sleaze. You're no different than the people who came to visit Vlad. Now, once more, I shall declare to you. Becoming that man's bride...made me joyous from the bottom of my heart."

"Good heavens, still trying to have the last word even in that state of yours. How adorable."

The Grand King spoke magnanimously. As she did, Hina spat something out.

It was a small animal fang, and it snapped tightly into an open hole in the halberd's handle.

The next moment, Hina leaped with her torso alone. Her wedding veil, which had survived the fire, fluttered, and cogwheels came tumbling out of her. As she did, the ax's handle twirled from the point where the fang had stabbed.

The curved ax blade snapped out of place and flew into the air.

Hina caught it by the back with her teeth and then swung it with nothing but the strength of her jaws.

"Hwah?"

With it, she cut the Marquis's neck clean through.

His head spun through the air and then landed on the ground with a *thump*. His eyes glanced left and right, as though trying to make sense of a bad joke. He didn't seem to quite grasp the situation yet.

After a short time, though, the Marquis's mouth went slack, and he stopped moving altogether. His head and body crumpled, transforming into black feathers.

"...Oh...my?"

Unable to follow, the Grand King let out an uncharacteristically foolish voice. However, at the same time, her rational side was precisely analyzing the situation.

Due to the brainwashing, no doubt.

The strong bindings she'd placed on the two of them had backfired. Because they'd been ordered to "burn away only her limbs," the Marquis hadn't been able to respond to Hina's attack quickly enough. Even so...

"An automaton...killed...a demon?"

The Grand King murmured, aghast. Reality had diverged too radically from her expectations.

The Marquis had been weakened, it was true. Still, this was an unacceptable upset, on the level of a rabbit killing a lion or a servant defeating a king. It was something that someone like her, who stood high above others, absolutely couldn't allow.

The Grand King put strength into the hand she was grasping her crow-feather fan in. Her favorite fan creaked and then loudly snapped. Having finally abandoned her elegance, the veins in her forehead throbbed as she screamed, "Kill her! Kill her, kill her, *kill her*! That girl can't be allowed to live any longer! Burn her to nothing! Don't even leave ash behind!"

Hearing her howls dripping with naked bloodlust, the Grand Marquis nodded deeply. He opened the mouth of his crow mask. Seeing the hellfire swirl within his maw, Hina hung her head and murmured quietly.

"Master Kaito... Even if death separates us, I shall always be yours. I believe that I, too, have a soul...and it shall be waiting for you."

A burst of flame shot forth, the largest one yet. The violent mass of black death bore down on Hina.

As it did, a smile full of love and affection spread across her face.

"I beg of you, don't follow after me too quickly."

In that moment, the bride was whispering as though in prayer, about to be burned to death.

Far away, up in the castle, the groom *watched over it all*.

A thousand chains were stuck into his body. He was suspended in the air like prey stuck in a spider's web.

A certain magical formula was written on the ground beneath his feet. If anyone with knowledge of magic had seen the inscription, they'd have no doubt instinctively opened their eyes wide in shock.

The ax that Hina had been using was linked to the arcane scrawl. Kaito had based it off Elisabeth's torture devices and had created it with the assistance of the Kaiser. The formula would transfer all the pain that the blade received to the chains and then straight into Kaito's body.

Demons took little pleasure in the pain of underlings and familiars.

To be able to give it to the Kaiser in the form of "human pain," Kaito had to reexperience all the gathered suffering himself.

The young man, who'd just experienced the death throes of hundreds, who'd just had his nerves burned to a crisp, and who'd just died countless times and been revived just as many, whispered.

"Can I go now? At this rate, my bride's gonna die."

"Oh yes—this should be sufficient, you madman."

The next moment, the black flames trying to engulf Hina were devoured by shadows.

All in attendance opened their eyes wide. At the same time, black feathers and azure flower petals began gently wafting down from the sky. They danced upon the battlefield, as if celebrating something.

The beautiful color and sinister shade coalesced upon the blood-soaked ground.

"What...is—?"

The Grand King's eyes were like dinner plates as they beheld the last person she ever would have expected.

A madman drenched in blood had appeared.

The jet-black cloth made by magic that adorned his body fluttered in the wind. The slender outfit called to mind a military uniform, and it was adorned with bloodred cloth and flared out partially into a long coat. Its hem whipped around.

The figure bore a resemblance to Vlad but gave less of an impression of a nobleman and more that of a military officer. Stepping on the black feathers and azure petals, he spoke.

“Sorry for the wait, Hina.”

Kaito murmured in a gentle voice, one unbefitting the situation.

Then the groom took his place next to his bride.



7
A
mage
Is Born

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n

7

A Mage Is Born

“Damn right. I had this idea, see— Will you hear me out? I can just give the Kaiser my pain. If I do that, I should be able to grant him a human’s pain without having to hurt others.”

That was the answer Kaito had given when Vlad asked him how he planned to fight the Grand King without taking anything from others.

Dark magic was accompanied by pain, and the power of demons demanded it. And Kaito’s body was accustomed to pain.

Those were the three points that Kaito had drawn his conclusion from.

It was a method that wasn’t available to Elisabeth Le Fanu, the Torture Princess. She wasn’t contracted to a demon. Demon flesh had spread its roots throughout her bone and sinew, and she generated mana within her own body. In Elisabeth’s case, self-harm would do nothing but cause her pain; she wouldn’t be able to accept anything from others and still offer it up as human suffering. However, even though Kaito was contracted with the Kaiser, the two had yet to completely fuse, so the method was available to him.

Still, as Vlad had said, it was a plan utterly devoid of sanity.

Taking on the pain of hundreds of people wasn’t a sensible course of action. The shock would cause cardiac arrest in most people, which would lead to a drop in blood pressure, rapid loss of consciousness, and likely death. However, Kaito was immortal. His soul was housed in a doll of Elisabeth’s design.

As long as all his blood didn’t flow out of his body, he could come back to life as many times as he needed. As a result, he’d been able to continuously supply the Kaiser with pain.

At that point, it became a matter of whether or not his soul could endure the

agony.

And Kaito Sena was well accustomed to pain. He'd placed his hand on the door that Elisabeth would never have told him to unseal and then boldly cast it open.

The Kaiser had called Kaito "Accumulation of Seventeen Years' Pain..."

...and praised him as a madman.



Kaito stood on the battlefield, his beastly arm raised straight ahead. The unflattering butler uniform he'd been wearing up until then had been completely replaced with a military outfit that looked right at home on the field of battle.

Shadows swirled around his beastly arm, the proof of his contract with the Kaiser. It caught the flames as though caressing them and then swallowed them whole. Still limbless, faint tears welled up in Hina's eyes as she looked up at him. "...Master Kaito."

"I'm sorry you ended up like this... It's all my fault."

Kaito knelt to the ground. He then held the newly lightened Hina in his arms, cradling her as he would something precious. He gently pressed his face against her lovely silver hair. She closed her eyes and then nuzzled her cheek against him.

After taking in his smell, fat tears began streaming down her cheeks.

"Oh, Master Kaito...I can smell your scent, I can feel your warmth. I beg of you, don't apologize. Being able to see you again brings me nothing but absolute joy."

"I'm really, really sorry. Up through the very last minute, I didn't know if I'd make it in time...so no matter how much I wanted to, I couldn't make any promises."

Kaito spoke softly. Would his method even work? Would the accumulated pain be enough to let the Kaiser wield the necessary amount of power?

Until he tried it out for real, it had been impossible for him to predict.

The amount of pain he could collect from single-mindedly torturing himself—which he’d actually done while he was waiting for the Grand King to show up—was a far cry from what could be obtained by harvesting the suffering of many foes at once.

Hina wielding the ax capable of sending pain to Kaito and fighting the thousand enemies had been indispensable to his plan. But he’d had to gamble on whether or not he’d be able to successfully save her.

Consequently, when he’d asked her to help him, *“Could you die for me?”* had been the only thing he’d been able to say. He hadn’t been able to give her any clumsy excuses or optimistic promises about their prospects.

Even so, she’d nodded in agreement.

As a result, he’d stacked Hina’s chips atop his own, slid them across the table, and ultimately came out victorious in his mad gamble.

Kaito raised his left hand, bristling with demonic energy, and fixed his gaze on the Grand Marquis. Hina, being cradled in his other, squeezed out her voice through her gasps.

“Master Kaito...did you merge with a demon? With the Kaiser?”

“Nope. But because I didn’t have enough mana to even make a contract, I had to give up the flesh and blood in my left arm, leaving the demon’s flesh in its place. Because the blood running through me is still Elisabeth’s, I can pull out more of the mana within it than before. And one other thing.”

At that point, Kaito stopped talking.

The Grand Marquis had made his move. In order to carry out the Grand King’s order, he attempted to remove the interloper—Kaito. The man, still clad in black, cylindrical clothes, bobbed through the air with the beak of the crow mask covering his wide-open face. He tried to spew yet more flames.

Kaito calmly watched the Grand Marquis. The amount of mana at the Grand Marquis’s disposal was far beyond what Kaito commanded.

I may have collected all that pain, but I still don’t have enough power.

There was no way he could reach the lofty heights Elisabeth stood upon, and

he was a long way off from matching the Grand Marquis as well. However, there were two facts that stood in his favor.

The first was that the Grand Marquis was still in his human form.

The Grand King might not have wanted something so hideous serving her, but in any case, the Grand Marquis still hasn't revealed his fully fused form. He isn't operating at max power.

If he wanted to win, now was his chance. Kaito snapped his fingers.

Darkness and azure flames swirled, gathering the corpses of underlings scattered around him and piling them up as though with a magnet. Their limbs cracked and bent as they formed a giant tower.

It was a technique he was modeling after one that the necromancer Marianne had once used.

Then he gave his order.

"La (become)."

As he did, the Grand Marquis released his flame. The stacked corpses' flesh burned up in a flash. However, their bones and bodily fluids had been strengthened by magic, hardening like tempered glass and repelling the flames. Additional flames swirled within the Grand Marquis's mouth as he tried to follow up on his attack. However, right before he could, the flames blinked out.

"...Did it work?"

Snapping his fingers, Kaito let his defensive barrier of bones collapse.

After confirming what had happened, his lips curled into a wicked grin.

The Grand Marquis's neck was snapped horizontally. Blood spurted out of his torn carotid artery with every heartbeat. A massive hound was resting its leg lightly atop the nape of his neck, as though holding down a plaything.

The black dog, whose eyes burned with hellfire and who had attacked the Grand Marquis from behind, grinned as it bit his body from the head down. The Kaiser then tossed the Grand Marquis casually into the air and caught him in its mouth. As though it were eating a snack, the Kaiser crunched down on the Grand Marquis's body.

Kaito finally listed the “one other thing” he’d mentioned earlier.

“Like Vlad, I can call upon the Kaiser for help.”

“The Kai...ser? Why is the Kaiser here...? Damn you, Vlad! Vlad, are you listening? No...you should be dead. But this situation! Surely you must have made a copy of your soul or something, no? Oh, this is just dreadful... What in the blazes have you done?!”

The Grand King was screaming. The fact that she’d immediately suspected Vlad, despite the fact that he was dead, went to show just how well she knew her old friend. In response to her cries, Kaito drew the clear stone from his pocket.

...Is he planning on coming out?

As he wondered, Kaito ran magical energy through the stone. The next moment, black feathers and azure rose petals swirled, and an aristocratic phantom appeared nonchalantly.

As he stood grandly atop the battlefield, he gave a light shrug.

“Well, well, it’s been a while, Grand King. I’ve been hearing quite a bit about you. You’ve been running a bit wild, haven’t you? Good to see you’re doing well.”

“Is...is that all you have to say?”

“Hmm? That was a fairly conventional greeting, no?”

“What do you think you’re doing, Vlad?! Allowing Elisabeth’s servant to form a contract with the Kaiser?! Because of you, demons are fighting other demons! You’ve gone mad!”

“Well now, this is a surprise. I’d rather not think that anyone who made a contract with a demon was could possibly be considered sane.”

Vlad stroked his chin in contemplation. The Grand King clutched her broken fan even tighter as her lips quivered in hatred. Seeing her bald-faced indignation, Vlad nodded once and loudly clapped his hands together.

“While it seems that you’re rather displeased, I ask that you do overlook this! After all, I currently find myself sealed within a stone, nothing more than a

pitiable replica of a soul—indeed, an inferior version of what ‘I’ once was. Given my current situation, I’m more loathe than ever to give up sources of entertainment.”

“Even so, you—you wretch—you mean to say you’re betraying me?”

“Betrayal is such a rude way to put it, I should think. When I was alive, I put a great deal of thought into the future—and of course, into you as part of that—as I commanded the demons. However, you refused to rescue me, instead choosing to live freely and value yourself above all else. I believe most would describe that as breaking off our friendship. And more power to you! People should live their own lives. I died, you lived, and you chose to use our brethren to your own ends. And it was your right to do as such. But for you to do so and then accuse me of betrayal for simply living as I see fit is rather vexing.”

“You abomination, that’s your logic?!”

“I mean, just look at the boy!”

After having carefully laying out his shameless reasoning, Vlad suddenly pointed at Kaito.

He then began boasting, like a breeder who’d just found a good puppy. His expression seemed practically innocent.

“If Kaito Sena descends into evil, that would be splendid—he will no doubt become my successor. However, if he sees his obstinance through, then my investment will have been for naught. It’s an all-or-nothing gamble. I was never much of a gambler in life, but this is rather entertainingly mindless fun. If there ends up being a victim or two or several along the way, then so be it. Indulging and stealing are at the core of demon philosophy, are they not?”

“You plan to steal from me, too, then?”

“You pierced your own comrades with your needles when you could have simply taken over in my stead and unified them. Don’t you think it’s odd, then, that you so fervently wish not to be betrayed? And it’s not as if I intended to betray you—as a side note, shall I tell you my true feelings on the matter?”

Vlad looked at the Grand King with eyes full of affection. When he spoke, the camaraderie in his voice was probably the exact same as it had been back in the

days that they had livened up balls together.

“I would love if you let go of your grief and died to your heart’s content for me.”

“Oh, I’m well aware... Oh yes, I knew, Vlad; I always knew! I knew that was the kind of man you were! That’s right... Ever since then, there hasn’t been a single person deserving of my trust...! Oh, my poor, ugly gardener...”

The words tumbled out of the Grand King’s mouth. Deep hatred and a complicated sadness crossed her face.

“...Why did you have to die on me?”

Her lip trembled a little bit.

With the Grand Marquis and Marquis having met their untimely ends, the Grand King was out of pieces to play. She had no demons left that she could force to spit out their hearts.

From her perspective, although the foe before her was far lower-class than she was, he was endowed with the Kaiser, whose abilities would normally be far greater than hers. However, her expression suddenly did a complete about-face.

She laughed proudly and then grabbed the collar of her dress with both hands.

“Fine, then—good, evil, it’s all the same.”

Then the Grand King pulled her scarlet dress down. Her bountiful breasts popped out. As her surviving underlings began raising their voices in excitement, she revealed her ample bust. However, her flesh started making a ghastly creaking noise, caving in, and dissolving.

Her naked body, which looked like that of a goddess or a personification of beauty, was breaking down.

Her skin rotted, her flesh peeled off in chunks, and her ribs became exposed. Her atrocious transformation spread. From within the frame of her crinoline dress, her legs rapidly became slender and skeletal as well.

As she shed her unseemly flesh, what remained of the Grand King’s lips curled

into a sweet smile.

“No matter how I amuse myself, live out my days, and die— that’s all there is to the world. That’s all there is to me. As such, I shall smile till the end. Oh, and lover boy? Make no mistake...”

For the first time, the Grand King turned her gaze to Kaito. Her scarlet eyes pierced through him. Her cheeks continued to erode, and her soft lips had split vertically and were dripping away.

But even though only her skull remained, her voice called out from somewhere and made her declaration.

“...You may have become a decent man, but the fact remains that I hold the advantage.”

She laughed. By this point, her top half was completely skeletal. Suddenly, her scarlet dress began expanding. Her skeleton and the cloth grew in sync. Her rings popped off, and she loudly crushed her palanquin.

A few of her underlings got caught beneath it and were crushed to death. Their screams were ecstatic. The surviving underlings fell to their knees and prostrated themselves.

What remained was a massive skeleton wearing a fluttering crimson skirt, its birdcage-like frame peeking out.

Her form was grotesque, yet somehow, she retained her elegance.

While releasing an aura that would drive fear into any who saw her, her teeth rattled and clattered.

“Now, lover boy, rejoice. I, Fiore, the Grand King, have forsaken my unparalleled, world-famous beauty in order to face you.”

The skeleton gave a refined bow as she made her declaration. Still holding Hina, Kaito’s whole body went tense. Vlad, who was standing beside him, shrugged and spoke in an exasperated tone.

“Forsaken her beauty, eh...? Now see, this is what makes women so troublesome.”

“Y’know, Vlad... I’m pretty sure this happened because you pissed her off.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, perish the thought. This was bound to happen sooner or later. So what do you intend to do? The Grand King’s power is mind control. In a one-on-one battle, her power is far below that of the Kaiser. However, that was only the case when I was his master. With you at the helm, the Kaiser is fairly clearly inferior—oh, careful there.”

“Cease your falsehoods—you say I would lose to that fool?”

The black dog’s jaws gouged Vlad’s back once more. Ignoring their little comedy routine, Kaito gently set Hina on the ground. Before she could say anything, he snapped his fingers.

The strengthened bones from earlier danced and then formed a protective hemisphere around her. Hina frantically called out:

“Master Kaito, I can still—”

Her voice faded to a mumble as she was enclosed in bone. After casting a lingering, affectionate gaze toward the bone wall, Kaito wrenched his eyes free.

Shaking his head, Vlad continued speaking.

“Well then, shall we put an end to the tomfoolery and get serious for a moment? The only one who could hope to defeat the Grand King in that state would be Elisabeth, if she were freed from Sacrifice...so it seems there’s little left for me to accomplish here. Best of luck. Go give it your all.”

“Wait, you’re just gonna rile her up and then bail?”

Declining to respond to Kaito’s exasperated question, Vlad transformed into black feathers and azure flower petals and vanished. The Grand King puffed up her chest and cast her arms wide.

Kaito snapped his fingers. Abruptly, the executioner’s blade that decapitated the Marquis flew through the air. It split into four and then spread out around Kaito.

Kaito carefully stopped them and gave his orders to the Kaiser.

“Sorry, but I’m going to have to devote all my attention to protecting myself. You should just focus on snapping her spine. If we can’t break her stance, we’re doomed.”

“Now then—I look forward to seeing if you can defend against her attacks or not, boy. Mind the needles. If she pierces your neck, I shall eat you myself.”

With a “geh-heh-heh,” the Kaiser left behind a human laugh as he raced across the ground.

The Kaiser then circled around to the Grand King’s back and leaped. However, the cloth of her crinoline dress suddenly moved and took on the form of a human woman. Then, like a shadowgraph or a puppet show, it attacked the Kaiser.

He took a sharp turn to avoid the fabric twining around him and then calmly dug his claws into the scarlet curtain. But even after being shredded, it just took on a new, slender human form.

“Time for chaos! Time to play!”

As it did, the Grand King’s main body swung its arms. Her sharp fingers bore down on Kaito.

Kaito snapped his fingers a second time and then a third. As if driven by unseen threads, the executioner’s ax’s blades slid forward and loudly repelled the Grand King’s five slashing fingers.

It sounded like a sword fight, and the noise echoed across the battlefield.

As though he were playing the keyboard, Kaito focused intently on turning back the fingers’ terrifyingly fast yet elegant attacks. He repelled a finger flying toward his right arm, blocked an attack from overhead, and diverted a finger that had circled around behind him. At the same time, he had to swipe away thin needles that were aiming for the nape of his neck with his beastly left arm. However, at the end of the day, Kaito was no more than human.

If you were to ask him, he would say that he was carrying out his defense with obstinance alone. His level of battle experience was overwhelmingly lacking.

Seeing that Kaito was already at his limit, the Grand King opened her mouth wide. Her teeth flew out and then exploded at Kaito’s feet. His right leg got blown off. However, darkness and azure petals swirled and reattached it before he could lose too much blood. As they did, the Kaiser grabbed him by the collar in his jaws and jumped.

“—!”

“I shan’t permit you to die in as ungainly a manner as that! You fool! Dying to one as inferior as the Grand King is a disgrace!”

The Kaiser’s rebuke drilled into his skull. A bombardment followed after them, and Kaito blocked it with his blades. However, all he was doing was defending. Like it or not, he realized that he had yet to land a single blow.

To make matters worse, while the Grand King had abandoned her human form, she still wasn’t fighting seriously. She rattled her jaw to provoke Kaito.

“How adorable, lover boy—where is that charming demeanor of yours? When are you going to show me whatever it was that drove that girl so mad for you? I don’t like to be kept waiting, you know.”

“At this rate, I’m done for—I guess people have limits, after all.”

“Oh my, you’re giving up already? In that case, do you plan to let me make you cry?”

The Grand King asked her question in a voice oozing with honey. It was unclear if she was using magic for the sole purpose of giving herself a voice, but now that she’d taken on her demonic form and lost her vocal cords, her whispers shook the air.

Kaito briefly shook his head at her blatant provocation.

“Nah, I’ve got no reason to cry. I’ve already got a woman I admire, and I’ve already got a woman I love.”

“My, I’m jealous. What’s your plan, then, lover boy?”

The Grand King asked her question while reaching out her arms and cleaving the earth in an attempt to crush Kaito and the Kaiser together, raising great clouds of dust as she did. The Kaiser leaped, barely avoiding her hand, and put some distance between them and the Grand King.

“Well then, boy, do as you please.”

The Kaiser opened his mouth and hurled Kaito away. Kaito almost crashed into the ground but was able to catch himself in a cloud of azure petals at the last minute. He stood upon solid earth once more.

Right before the Grand King could crush him flat, he spread his arms wide like a stage magician.

“I plan to do this.”

Then the executioner’s ax’s blade he was controlling sliced through his chest.



Blood spilled forth.

A massive amount of blood.

Kaito dropped to his knee as he endured the incredible pain that shot through him. The sensation was almost nostalgic.

Blood and viscera sloshed out of the wound in his chest he had made himself. His blood was tinged with heat, and it transformed into flower petals—this time, crimson—and danced into the air.

As she followed the trail of crimson up into the air with her hollow eye sockets, the Grand King let out a puzzled voice.

“You, what are you...? A suicide attack? No, that’s not it. What is this?”

The petals ignored her, flying off in an unexpected direction.

As they flitted through the air, they left the Grand King behind and eventually blew their way as one toward the fortified castle.

As though announcing the arrival of spring, the stream of petals entered a bedroom through its cutout window. The way the crimson petals surged together resembled cherry blossoms raining down from their trees.

At their destination—the top of a bed—slept a girl boasting peerless beauty.

The Torture Princess was in a deep, deep slumber. A single petal caressed her neck with a sharp motion and left a sizable cut on her pale throat.

Then the petals flooded the wound. They rushed into her body, one by one.

It was the exact same as the way Elisabeth had once forcibly given Kaito a blood transfusion upon Clueless’s torture rack at the Church. Kaito’s blood was flowing into her body.

Far away, down on the battlefield, Kaito donned a thin smile, his stomach still torn open.

“...Finally, huh?”

This was his true objective, the real reason he’d formed his contract with the Kaiser.

Kaito had realized a few key facts.

First of all, Sacrifice was a spell that dammed up the flow of mana in one’s body, rendering it unable to be freely used. But the mana itself was still there.

Second, the only way to dispel Sacrifice was to drive blood with mana more powerful than Elisabeth’s into her body.

Third, the blood running through Kaito’s body was Elisabeth’s, and thanks to his contract with the Kaiser, *its power had been increased*.

Eventually, almost all the crimson petals swarming around her pale neck had vanished.

The few remaining petals rested upon her face. Suddenly, the runes covering her skin began to crawl. After writhing like a snake in agony, they began gently fading away.

Before long, they were completely gone.

Elisabeth’s body was freed.

However, she was still asleep. Then suddenly, her lips parted slightly.

With a small puff, Elisabeth sent the flower petals that had been resting atop her face fluttering into the air. She slowly reached out a finger and traced the cut on her neck, closing it.

Then she scooped up a single petal and pressed it lightly against her lips.

Kaito’s blood gradually made her lips flush.

Finally, as though she’d awoken from a century-long slumber, Elisabeth Le Fanu opened her eyes.

She was silent for a moment.

Eventually, she made a deliberate noise and removed her finger from her lips. Then she spoke in a calm, gentle whisper.

“What a foolish man. After this, it’s the Ducking Stool for him.”

The next moment, the Torture Princess vanished from atop the bed.

All that remained were a few crimson flower petals.



A storm had arrived. Anyone would have thought that.

After all, if not a storm, what else could it have possibly been?

Immense shadows and innumerable crimson flower petals whipped about, far more than what had appeared alongside Kaito. They magnificently, floridly painted over the space.

The maelstrom made a loud, rumbling noise as they forcefully permeated the space. It looked as though a thousand roses had scattered, like ten thousand flowers had been torn to pieces.

The Grand King spoke in confusion as the petals pranced around her.

“This isn’t... It can’t be... This shouldn’t be possible!”

The storm began contracting and shrinking. The wind and darkness compressed with alarming force. Petals shot across the ground and carved a crimson glyph into it. Atop that, the petals began taking on the shape of a person.

A moment later, they exploded outward.

Chains gushed out from within the mass. Streaks of silver cleaved through the air, tolling like bells ringing in the New Year.

Along with the thousand rattling chains, a beautiful woman appeared.

Her sleek black hair fluttered, and her bondage dress—clad body curved seductively. The mantle-like fabric adorning her back waved in the wind, and her heels dug into the earth.



She held the Executioner's Sword of Frankenthal in her hand, and with it she sliced the air.

As she did, the gusting wind vanished as though it had never been there. The woman opened her crimson eyes. Her beauty was unparalleled and world-famous. She looked at the Grand King.

Then the Torture Princess, Elisabeth Le Fanu, spoke at last.

"IIIIIIIIII've made a full recoveryyyyyyyy!"

Out of all the things she could have chosen to say, that's what she went with?

That candid remark was the first thing that crossed Kaito's mind. However, Elisabeth didn't notice his frigid gaze. Without a shred of elegance, she cracked her neck.

"Ah, what a bother. I overslept, and now I find myself thoroughly exhausted. And my body rather aches."

Elisabeth exaggerated every motion as she rotated her shoulders. After cracking her neck one more time, she swung her sword. Stopping it cleanly in midair, she pointed it at the Grand King.

Her gaze silently pierced the Grand King with beast-like intensity.

"It seems you've had quite the run of the place up till now, Grand King."

"Damn you, Elisabeth."

"Now that my servant, the most foolish man in the world, has returned my power to me, I'm sure you can guess at your fate, no? Your mind control technique is truly superb. I find it difficult to believe that your prowess in combat could possibly match it. That is exactly why you made use of Sacrifice, is it not?"

Elisabeth smiled maliciously. The Grand King offered no answer. She simply took a step backward.

The ground rumbled as the massive skeleton withdrew slightly. She surveyed her surroundings in bewilderment. The Kaiser stood before her, his eyes burning with hellfire, as did Elisabeth, resplendent in all her pride.

Eventually, a word dribbled out of the Grand King's mouth.

"...Elisabeth."

"I told you, didn't I, Grand King? Evil carries with it retribution. Your punishment has caught up with you at last."

"ELISABEEEEEEEEEEEEEEETH!"

"How pleasant it feels to hear you cry out my name, Grand King Fiore!"

Elisabeth brought down the Executioner's Sword of Frankenthal. Following her command, the thousand chains wound around the Grand King. Their pointed tips bound her arms, waist, and neck to the ground like wedges. She struggled violently, but the chains refused to break.

Elisabeth raised her sword high.

Then as she yelled, she brought it down, as though carrying out an execution.

"Ice Sculpture!"

An intense chill coiled around the Grand King. While Kaito tried to keep his gaping wound closed with what little mana he had remaining, his eyes went wide.

Sparkling snow crystals danced around the Grand King. However, her bones felt nothing. She rattled her teeth, as if in disappointment. As she did, though, a massive statue of a goddess appeared beside her. The beautiful statue had snow-white skin and hair, and she smiled kindly at the skeletal woman.

Then the statue tilted the water jug she was holding over her.

Each time the water rained down onto the Grand King, it froze over. Her underlings, who were still prostrating themselves around her, were immediately encased in frost. The Grand King was going to be sealed alive inside an ice sculpture.

She seemed to have realized the fate awaiting her. If she were trapped in the ice and the sculpture were smashed, it would be all over for her. She turned her hollow eye sockets toward Elisabeth.

Elisabeth was still smiling. Distress ran across the Grand King's bony face. The

composure she'd maintained up till now was gone, and her teeth rattled unbidden for the first time.

"No... I can't meet my end here, not in a place like this... Oh, Pierre..."

That had surely been her gardener's name.

The Grand King's eye sockets were empty, yet Kaito could clearly see something resembling fear in her expression.

The next moment, Elisabeth began rebuking the Grand King.

"How pitiable you are, Grand King, to retract your own words like that."

"..."

"Good, evil—it's all the same. No matter how we amuse ourselves, live out our days, and die—that's all there is to the world. You were the one who said that, were you not?"

Elisabeth's criticism was cutting.

Her scornful tone made it clear that she was asking why the Grand King was complaining. They both went quiet. Before long, though, the Grand King broke the silence, her shoulders trembling.

"...Ha-ha-ha... Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, ha-ha."

Her scarlet dress shook as her chest heaved with laughter. The Grand King raised her voice in amusement.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, well said, Elisabeth Le Fanu! Indeed, everything is as you say!"

She laughed, her voice ringing gracefully. She scowled at her surroundings, as though to say she had nothing to fear or to be ashamed of. If she'd still been holding her crow-feather fan, she'd probably have made a show of unfurling it and covering her mouth.

As the ice hardened around her, the woman who'd lived and breathed evil made her proud declaration.

"Quite so—I, Fiore, the Grand King, intend to laugh all the way to the grave."

And just as she'd said, the Grand King didn't scream or plead once.

She was still alive when the ice fully encased her. Sealed in ice, her fate was the exact opposite of her friend who'd been burned at the stake.

Still in her hideous form, she was transformed into a sculpture.

Then the chains swung.

Silver chains struck the Grand King's sculpture and smashed it to pieces. Chunks of bone sheathed in ice went flying and then transformed into black feathers as they whirled into the air. Then the feathers fluttered down upon the battlefield like snow, carpeting the corpses of the underlings and familiars.

In the midst of all that was Elisabeth, who had closed her eyes, opened them, and thrust her fist into the air.

"How weak!"

The battle against their most terrible foe ended.

As the reality of that fact sank in, Kaito snapped his fingers. The bones surrounding Hina dissolved and crumbled to the ground.

Seemingly pleased with the Grand King's death, the Kaiser gave a deep laugh. Suddenly, though, he raised his snout and turned to face Kaito. As his eyes burned with a sinister glow, he spoke deep and bluntly.

"Bear this in mind, O Accumulation of Seventeen Years' Pain. I find your perversion pleasant. On the other hand, I do not take kindly to your refusal to destroy this world and mankind along with it. However, through no fault of my own, my power has been called into question, so I shall continue aiding you as you butcher the remaining demons to demonstrate my strength. I look forward to seeing how far your warped determination can carry you."

Geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, fu-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.

The Kaiser vanished, leaving behind his humanlike laughter. The afterglow from the hellfire in his eyes hung in the air and then disappeared as well. Kaito shook his head a little and then surveyed his surroundings.

Suddenly, his eyes met Elisabeth's.

"Um—"

“Mm—”

She stared directly at him. He returned her gaze. Neither said a word.

After a long, long silence, however, Kaito was eventually the first to lose his patience.

“I’m really sorry.”

“I’ll have your head.”

Their exchange was concise. Elisabeth seemed serious. Sensing how earnest she was, Kaito raised his arms. Elisabeth approached him with long strides. Then, with one hand, she hoisted him up by his collar. Her beautiful face twisted fiendishly as she laid her rage bare.

“What possessed you to make a contract with a demon? And the Kaiser, no less! Hmm?! What on earth was going through your mind? I’d been led to believe that there was *some* gray matter lurking in that skull of yours, but clearly, I was mistaken! Even idiocy should be practiced in restraint!”

“Wh— It’s fine! I didn’t hurt anyone, and now you’re safe!”

“That’s precisely the problem, you imbecile!”

The emotion in her voice was stifled, and it hit Kaito unexpectedly hard.

Elisabeth put more strength into her slender grip. Her crimson gaze landed on Kaito’s left hand, the one that had transformed into that of a beast. As she glared at it, she quietly continued.

“’Tis not what I resurrected you for, nor why I made you immortal.”

“Elisabeth...”

“Fool.”

Kaito lowered his arms and then let the tension drain from his body. He obediently let Elisabeth hang him up in the air. Right as he was about to say something, he heard the sound of weeping.

The two of them looked to the side in surprise.

The next moment, Elisabeth tossed him away. He almost tumbled to the ground, but he managed to land safely. They both rushed forward, making their

way over to Hina, who was still lying on the ground.

“Forgive me, Hina! Your wounds no doubt ail you! Oh, your beautiful limbs, what have they—? Nay, ’tis no matter! I shall mend them for you, leaving nary a scar! Worry not!”

“Hina, are you okay?! Does it hurt? It does, doesn’t it? I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

“N...no, that’s not it. That’s, nod, id.”

As Kaito held her up in his arms, great, big tears came streaming out of Hina’s eyes. Kaito and Elisabeth tilted their heads to the side, unsure of what she meant. Hina’s face was as scrunched up as a child’s.

Hina struggled to elaborate through her sobs.

“I’b so habby... So habby that you’re okay, Baster Kaito, and that you’re bedder, Lady Elibabeth. Thank, thank goodness...”

“Hina...”

“...Thank you, Hina.”

Elisabeth pulled a clean handkerchief from a swirl of darkness and mopped up Hina’s tears. Kaito gently stroked her silver hair. Hina beamed through her tears.

The three of them huddled together on the remnants of the battlefield.

It had finally gotten quiet again.

For the three of them, it was the first peaceful moment in a long, long while.



The minute they returned to the castle, Elisabeth got to work on Hina’s treatment. Carrying the limbless Hina in her arms, she made her way to an underground chamber, kicked out Kaito, who’d followed along, and closed the door.

For a short while, thunderous noises rang out from the door’s far side. It sounded less like medical treatment and more like construction work.

On the near side, Kaito stood at rapt attention.

An indeterminate amount of time passed.

Eventually, the closed door opened as violently as the noises within had been.

Elisabeth was cradling Hina in her arms. Her thin, pale body was clad in a fresh maid uniform and had four proper limbs fastened to it. Tears welling up in his eyes, Kaito spread his arms wide and dashed over to her side.

“Hina!”

“Fool, don’t go touching her so carelessly! She’s but temporarily pieced together. The gears within her are in a dreadful state of disarray. For the time being, she needs to let her automated maintenance and repair functions do their work.”

Elisabeth pressed her foot into his face, and Kaito stopped in his tracks. As he was about to rub his crushed nose, she made an announcement with a quiet expression on her face.

“I should warn you, but Hina is about to enter a deep slumber.”

“A deep...slumber?”

“She needs to realign her interior mechanisms, after all. While she does, she’ll need to put a halt to all other functionality. Come now, gently lift her. You’ll need to carry her. Gently, mind you.”

Urged on by Elisabeth, Kaito gingerly reached out.

He picked up Hina ever so carefully and held her in his arms. She opened her eyes a hair and gave him a drowsy smile.

He carried her as he would something extremely fragile. After making his way upstairs, he set her down on the bed Elisabeth had been occupying until just recently. He asked his next question in a bewildered voice.

“When you say a deep slumber...how long is that gonna be?”

“There’s hardly cause to sound so miserable. While I can’t give a firm estimate, it shan’t take long. This isn’t good-bye.”

Kaito softly stroked Hina’s cheek. Her head trembled as though it tickled, and she weakly opened her mouth. She spoke in a sweet, hoarse, barely audible

voice.

“My deepest...apologies... It seems...I will be taking...a short leave...”

“I’m so sorry, Hina. Is there...is there anything you want?”

“Anything...I want?”

“If there’s anything you want, I can get it for you while you sleep. Can...can you think of anything?”

Flustered by the abruptness of the situation, Kaito continued his line of questioning. Hina closed her eyes and pondered for a moment.

Eventually, she smiled and gently murmured.

“In that case...may I make...one selfish request?”

“Yeah, anything.”

“I wish...to become a family with you...Master Kaito.”

Hearing Hina’s words, Kaito’s eyes went as wide as if he’d been struck. “Family,” he dumbfoundedly repeated. Up until then, it had been a word that had brought him nothing but misery.

Hina knew that. That was precisely why she continued, her emerald eyes brimming with love and affection.

“Unlike...human women...I cannot bear children... But I wish...to become... your family, Master Kaito... I don’t want you...to be alone...anymore.”

“Hina...”

“I want...to become...your family... One that...properly...loves...”

“D-don’t be ridiculous, Hina... You always have been... From the moment we met, you’ve been my companion, right?”

As he spoke, Kaito choked back tears. Hina bore a tender smile. Kaito caressed her cheek again and again. He spoke once more, repeating himself with a voice full of heartfelt love.

“You’re my beloved wife, aren’t you?”

“Ah...so...I am.”

After mumbling about how happy she was and how it was like she was living in a dream, Hina fell into a deep slumber.

“...Sniff...nn...hic...unh...nn...sob...”

Tears that even his own painful deaths never brought out were now rolling down Kaito's cheeks.

All the things he'd lost and all the things he hadn't been able to obtain streamed through his mind.

Elisabeth said nothing. She simply waited for him to calm down.

At the end of the battle, after the insane choices he'd made,

Kaito Sena had finally found a family.





Eventually, Kaito roughly rubbed his eyes and stepped away from Hina. His eyes still red, he spoke a few words.

“Sorry, that was kind of pathetic... I’m okay now.”

“Hmph, I saw nothing... Nay, I shall say this. ’Tis no shame in crying when one must.”

Kaito turned toward Elisabeth. She wasn’t looking at him. She was staring off into space. Her lips upturned, she bluntly repeated herself.

“’Tis no shame in crying when one must. Go ahead and cry.”

“Yeah, you’re right... Thanks.”

Kaito laughed weakly and nodded.

Then Elisabeth suddenly turned to look at him, her black hair fluttering. She frowned intensely.

“Your smile is sickening.”

“Well, that’s rude.”

“Indeed, but complimenting you would be far stranger! At any rate, excellent as my bedchambers are, I really ought to get around to repairing that window.”

“Can’t you just fix it with magic?”

It happened then, with the two of them having just begun their conversation.

A shrill noise rang out, like something scraping against glass, and shattered their brief peaceful moment. Hearing the grating noise, Kaito called out.

“Make it stop! It’s gonna wake up Hina!”

“Worry not. During the mending process, nothing can possibly wake her. But what is that noise?”

A milky-white orb was racing above the forest. It was one of the Church’s emergency contact devices, and it made its way through the broken window before stopping in front of Elisabeth and Kaito. Feathers plopped out of its sides. Then it reverted to an ordinary jewel and fell into Elisabeth’s palm.

Hundreds of glyphs raced across its surface. After deciphering the message, Elisabeth's eyes widened.

Feeling an ominous premonition, Kaito nervously raised a natural question.

"Elisabeth, what does it say?"

"Oh my...this is a surprise, even to me. Even with the high odds I'd be done in by the Grand King, I can see why they sent for me."

She shook her head side to side. Then she made a quiet announcement.

"The capital is under attack, with as many as a third of its citizens having been slaughtered—and Godd Deos numbers among the dead."

Kaito swallowed hard. The capital held three-tenths of the population and was supposed to be a cornerstone for humanity's continued survival. And Godd Deos was a man who'd been in a position to trade his life to seal away the Torture Princess, if the need ever arose. Kaito himself had talked with him just a few days ago.

If a man as powerful and important as that had been killed, just what state exactly was the capital in?

As if in response to Kaito's inquisitive gaze, Elisabeth went on.

"The capital has been practically destroyed—at this rate, it and all the paladins will be annihilated."

Her words rang in a new battle against the demons,

as well as the beginning of the end.

Afterword

Hello, Keishi Ayasato here.

I was able to put out the second book.

Thank you all so much for buying the second volume of *Torture Princess*. In this volume, I was able to include one of the scenes I'd wanted to write since I began the series, so I was very moved. To be more specific, it was the bride mowing down her foes. Ever since I first thought up Hina, I knew I wanted to include a scene like that. Things got kind of hairy in this volume, but if you enjoyed it, then I could ask for nothing more.

Thinking back on the second book, Hina played a pretty central role, but I'm planning on having Elisabeth take the spotlight in the third. Things are probably going to get hairy again in book three, so it would make me really happy if you all look forward to it.

As an aside, I wrote another limited-edition booklet for Animate to go with the second volume! I wrote it in such a way that skipping it won't affect your enjoyment of the main story, but if any of you are interested in taking a peek into the dangerous, amusing, prattling lives of the three heroes and the Butcher, I hope you check it out (I'm the type to toss in advertisements in places like this). Please take a look, even if all you do is admire the fascinating, adorable cover Ukai drew for it. Elisabeth and Hina have animal ears!

I humbly thank you in advance.

I'm almost out of room in the afterword here, so as is custom in one's books, I have some people I'd like to thank. Saki Ukai, for all your beautiful illustrations, thank you very much. The cover, in particular, caused words to fail me and I had no choice but to prostrate myself before the magnificence of your work. To my designer and my publisher, your suggestions were invaluable, and to my editor O, I wish to extend my sincerest gratitude.

And last but not least, to all my readers, I would like to thank you as many times as I can. The greatest joy a writer can experience comes from a reader picking up their book. I'll put everything I have into the third volume, so if you would all be so kind as to continue reading, it would warm me from the bottom of my heart.

And with that, I pray we will meet again.

I will now excuse myself to return to my ongoing battle against back pain and stiff shoulders.

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